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GOD'S WILL
AND
OTHER STORIES

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ILSE FRAPAN

GOD'S WILL

AND

OTHER STORIES

TRANSLATED BY

HELEN A. MACDONELL



LONDON

T. FISHER UNWIN

PATERNOSTER SQUARE

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GOD'S WILL.



GOD'S WILL.

SPRING had scarcely begun, but already mild sunshine lay above the swift-speeding Neckar, and the trees along the hill-slope wore a greenish veil woven of young opening buds. Children passed by with bunches of cowslips and wild hyacinths in their hands ; holding their flowers they stood round the glebe-farmer's dwelling, from which the coffin had just been carried, and stared with wide-open blue eyes at the mysterious proceedings.

The glebe-farmer's wife had died. With bowed and uncovered head her husband stepped from the house ; after him came two little girls clad in new black frocks that hung dangling about their feet. The

elder, her eyes buried in her handkerchief, followed the mournful procession with blind, stumbling footsteps. The younger cried unrestrainedly; her brown, curly-locked head, however, moved this way and that, or turned right round, for the inquisitive eyes to note who might yet follow. The old woman at her side would now and again shake her roughly by the arm as a means of recalling her to a fitting seriousness; whereat, snatching her handkerchief, she must needs pour into it such piercing shrieks as impelled first one and then another of the small flower-bearers to stand on tiptoe in order to find out from whom the noise proceeded.

At the open grave the mourners halted, the minister meeting them to bear witness in tones of emotion to the virtues and piety of the dead woman, and to deplore her premature cutting off from her young children. Here the little girl suddenly caught sight of her cousin, for whom she had long been on the watch. He stood opposite her at the other side of the grave, and when their eyes met, both were seized with one of those fits of involuntary laughter that are so apt

on solemn occasions to bring children into trouble. Lena was thrust aside with an angry jerk by her Aunt Ursula ; ashamed, she hid her eyes in the folds of the woman's skirts. The lanky boy, Pete, received a warning cuff from one of the pall-bearers, and narrowly missed tumbling into the open mound. To cover his confusion at sight of the minister's reproving glance, he slipped on all fours and edged himself surreptitiously out of the throng. At that moment, however, every eye became fixed upon the elder girl, who, when the minister had finished speaking, and the coffin was being raised, threw herself with a loud cry upon it, clutching at it with outstretched arms.

"Marie, child !" cried the father, and caught her by her frock. But she did not move. Then the minister drew near, touched her shoulder softly, and said in a voice that was almost tender—

"Let your mother sleep till our dear Lord awakens her."

The girl lifted her head ; gradually her hands relaxed their hold.

"Come," said the minister ; and he led her back into the empty house.

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Verily the cross is hard to bear when young daughters are bereft of their mother. Like orphaned lambs Marie and Lena ran about among the farm-servants. The ten-year-old younger child asked in blank perplexity, "Who will give me my supper now?" as if with the disappearance of mother, the provider, all outlook of food and drink had likewise vanished. Of course she found quicker comfort than the thirteen-year-old Marie, whose silent, scalding tears neither bread nor friendly words could have eased. Bread indeed was forthcoming; friendly words lacked utterly. Children thus circumstanced too often, alas! lose even the surviving parent, though he, perchance, remain mindful of his outward duty. The natural binding element is gone, and to an old peasant his young daughter's thoughts may well prove a foreign language. On the other hand, it will sometimes come to pass that father and daughter grow nearer one another; but this supposes that the man yet preserves within him the potentiality of growth. As regarded the glebe-farmer, no such hope could be entertained. His wife had died after years of grievous illness, but

even while lying half paralysed on her bed of sorrow she had been the life and soul of the household. She thought for her husband, she availed herself of his strength to act for him ; it was her voice that maintained discipline among the servants. One could have fancied her watchful eye had power to pierce through walls and doors. On the very eve of her death her trembling fingers still managed to cut the children's bread.

And now, since her feeble voice had ceased to call, the farmer went about like an altered man. He, who had once been extolled for the wonderful patience with which he endured his wife's long illness, fell into a state of chronic irritation now that he found himself free. He bore his trouble unresignedly, as though there was nothing worse that God could have imposed, and would fain have straightway wedded another wife just to escape from his unchanging mood of depression. Like most hard-natured beings, he could at any time ill support the sight of other people's grief. His elder daughter's tears were a standing annoyance. Her delicately-shaped little face, with its clear white brow and wistful

eyes, had assumed a pained expression which he read as a reproach. In his wife's active days, when she was eager to take upon herself the lion's share of work, he had many a time nagged at her, and with coarse brutality taunted her for her feebleness of body. On such occasions she had looked at him with the very look that he now saw on Marie's countenance a week after her mother's death when he came home half drunk to dinner. His eyebrows contracted as he said—

“What's up?” And when the tears rose to her eyes, he flung down his spoon. “Ah, raining into the broth, as usual, is it?”

“Eh, but it's good; fit for a king!” said Lena, and smiled at her father.

Muttering, he took up his spoon again, from time to time casting a dissatisfied glance at Marie.

“Look at Lena; she's not for ever moping. I wish you took after her a bit more,” he broke out at length, when food had slightly mollified his cross-grained humour.

With an effort Marie swallowed her broth and tears, but there was no smile on her brow. She gazed at the place where her mother's

bed had stood, from which after any prolonged absence the pallid hand had always greeted her—she seemed still to see the large grey eyes shine sadly, lovingly from the empty space against the wall.

“I’d such a craving after mother,” said Marie, “and”—a fearless look suddenly animating her face—“after all, she was my mother.”

“Ay, she was all you ever troubled your head over ; but she’s gone now,” shrieked the glebe-farmer, with thickened utterance, and banged his hand in an aimless fashion upon the table, causing the crockery to rattle. “I’m there now ; one would think——” He gazed savagely round, then snatched the loaf, but straightway flung down the knife upon the floor. “Not been sharpened,” he growled ; “it’s as blunt as a yard-stick ! What’s the good of you ? Are you there for nothing but to eat ?”

Crimson with confusion, Marie ran off to sharpen the knife, but by the time she returned her father had gone, and when late in the evening he came home again his “drop too much” had grown into a real bout of drunkenness.

Marie dreamed that night that she was going to die ; she watched

her grave being dug, and felt quite happy over it. But somehow she could not get free ; Lena twined her arms about her, and said, "Mother's not there yet ; must wait a bit." Whereupon she awoke, and heard the sister drawing even breath beside her. "I am glad I've got my Lena," she murmured. The little girl tossed about in her sleep, her sharp elbow almost pushing Marie out of bed. Cautiously the elder sister climbed over her, and lay down in the vacant space against the wall. But she could not get to sleep again : it was so stuffy in the room, and through the thin wall came the loud, irritating sound of her father's uneasy snore.

It was yet hardly dusk ; the small windows were thickly bedewed.

Marie got out of the warm bed, slipped on a skirt and short jacket, and stole barefooted to the house-door. Ragged strips of cloud flecked the clear greysky, and in the whitely brilliant east appeared a dark and mighty form, huge as a gigantic bird with outspread wings.

The girl's knees trembled as she gazed upon it ; below in the steaming mist lay the river, the weir, the vine-clad banks, Mühlhausen nest-

ling round the slender church-spire on the opposite shore of the Neckar like a white flock grouped slumbering about its herd. The great cloud-picture alone seemed to live, to be awake ; the huge wings were bordered by the yet unrisen sun with a hem of glittering silver.

" 'Tis the eagle of the Lord," thought Marie of a sudden, "the Lord who has watched over us, our house, the whole village, while it was dark."

A feeling of reverent thankfulness thrilled her soul. But in the same instant a grave sense of responsibility overcame her, as the lowing of the cows in their stall fell upon her ear.

"Hannah ought to be up, feeding them," she thought. "I must wake her ; it is my business now." She looked around. All manner of implements lay strewn untidily about the floor, or stood so placed in corners that any one might stumble over them. The milk-cans were unscoured ; the dung-heaps upset, littering half the courtyard. "The farm-boy is careless ; father must give him a talking to," she told herself.

Then she no longer stayed musing, but went into the room

that adjoined the stable, and tapped the servant-girl on the shoulder.

"Up with you, Hannah ; you'd sleep till doomsday, I believe."

The girl opened her heavy eyes and stared.

"It's still half dark," she yawned ; " what do you want of me ? "

" You're to get up and feed the cows ; it's time," repeated Marie, firmly ; and her serious face told Hannah that from that moment a new mistress had arisen in the motherless household.

* * * *

When the minister set out on his morning walk—a daily expedition undertaken as part of his water-cure—he noticed an unwonted activity at his neighbour's farm. Jäckle was standing sullenly among the dung-heaps, raking and tidying in right thorough fashion. And round a bend of the road came Marie herself, wheeling a barrow piled high with fresh fodder. Her breast heaved, and she moved somewhat wearily. Drops of perspiration stood upon her brow, but her glowing little face expressed self-satisfaction and zeal.

" You're at it betimes, Marie," said the minister, approvingly. " That'll please father."

"Last night when he got in he——" she blushed a still deeper red, and broke off.

"You'll soon be a real help to him," continued the minister, kindly, and his smile went to the young girl's heart like a paternal greeting. She bent upon him her large, trustful eyes, and said in a faltering voice—

"He asked what I was good for—whether I was only there to eat."

The pastor's face darkened as from an unpleasant sensation. "I don't like to hear that," he said, reprovingly ; "it is not for a child to complain of her father."

"No," said Marie, and the gently reliant expression vanished from her face. With a shy, sideward glance she made room for the minister to pass. He looked back at her once, then went on his way, shaking his grey head from time to time.

While the two girls were at school the minister again halted beside his neighbour's yard, and finally beckoned to the farmer, who, heavy-browed and red-eyed, was trying to clear his fuddled head at the well.

They held short converse, the farmer contributing but little. Once in a while the clergyman's voice

would grow loud and urgent ; for the most part, however, they spoke in undertones. Impotent defiance expressed itself on Deininger's rough sunburnt face, as the visitor took his departure. After this conversation he indeed no longer frequented the alehouse, but his elder daughter came in for many a malignant glance, and the gulf between father and child steadily widened.

In spite of industry, thrift, and good conduct, it would have been a gloomy household had not light-hearted Lena been there to tease and provoke laughter. Fearless as a squirrel for which nuts are every day forthcoming, and which no blast, however rough, can dislodge from the tree, she tripped about the house, her tongue as incessantly busy as were her slender limbs.

Yes, Lena was a winsome, lively creature. Even the minister always welcomed the sight of her rosebud face peeping over the hedge, and her never-failing suggestion of some small service to be done him or his good wife. Their own children being full-grown and dispersed abroad, the merry little maiden was doubly pleasing to them, and she was made free to accompany the minister's wife on her rambles

through the woods. Lena would, it is true, have preferred going to Cannstadt ; it was not over-amusing to walk in the wood. Still, a fair measure of gossip was open to her here, and at home Marie had ever a task ready to hand, which by this device she could escape ; for of course a walk with the minister's wife served to cancel all obligations. Then, too, she loved little children more than aught else, and could fondle and nurse them so deftly that the village mothers gladly confided their babies to her care. Everybody found her obliging ; the neighbours at the parsonage most of all. If the servant was out, it was so easy to send Lena to the baker for rolls. If a bit of linen flew off the lines, the light-footed slip of a thing tore away to recover it, and the minister's wife noted approvingly how she would give it a thorough rinsing down at the river if the moist ground had left a stain upon its whiteness.

Marie, who silently, to the best of her ability, had undertaken the guidance of the household, could in truth have related that, in her own home, the little sister was not so out-of-the-way serviceable, but her more serious temperament led her

to think of Lena as much younger even than she was. Gradually it came about that Marie assumed altogether the position of the ministering mother, even as regarded Lena herself.

"She, indeed!" Lena would exclaim, if her teacher at the school found fault, and set up Marie as a model of diligence. She was simply amazed at the notion of any one suggesting that it was in her to sit gravely there like Marie.

Lena was very popular with her school-mates. No prank could be carried out in which she did not participate; were she missing, no game was held complete. Her arms were such snug handles for any one to hook into, and she was rarely seen unattended. "There goes the glebe-farmer's Lena," would say the neighbours, whereat every face relaxed into smiles, though there was nothing much to commend about her. "There goes the glebe-farmer's Marie! There's industry for you; that girl has stuff in her." But the praise was spoken in sober accents.

The truth is, Marie was held in esteem, not beloved. "Miss Long-face," said the girls when she passed by grave and preoccupied. If some one addressed her she was quickly

responsive, but she kept to the point, and then went her way. She had no notion of gossip, and never knew what was going on in the village. Not so much from timidity as from disapproval did she shun noisy discussions, chaffering in the market, and street fights. Had her lot been cast in the early days of Catholicism she would perhaps have entered a convent at the age of fourteen. She seemed oppressed with the sense of her responsibility, with her indoor and outdoor duties. Her father could spare neither time nor thought save for his vineyard, which, admirably situated on the sunny bank of the Neckar, and yielding a full crop almost year by year, yet demanded unremitting attention. The kitchen-garden, potato-patch, the maize, and a small plot of rye some distance off towards Fellbach, were entirely left in the keeping of Marie and Hannah. Even the farm-boy's help was scarcely vouchsafed them. They lived meagrely withal, the farmer piling piece on piece in miserly fashion and paring down expenses. Except on Sunday meat was not seen upon his table. A big dish of salad, curds, and bread, and, as a beverage, must — with these his

day's needs were fulfilled. His tough, brown, dried-up body needed nothing more—therefore such provision must suffice the remainder of the household.

“Have a care lest Marie push things too far,” said the doctor one day when he came across the farmer at the “Star”; “she’s pale and weedy-looking, and she tells me of bad headaches many a time.”

“‘Morning showers, women’s trouble,
Vanish quicker than a bubble,’”

laughed the farmer, with a jerk of his head.

“It might be with her as it was with your late wife,” continued the doctor, nowise disconcerted. “She broke down in the same way.”

“Work’s good for folk,” persisted the farmer, in a tone of conviction; “just look at me,” and he tried to straighten his stooping shoulders.

“But a young girl’s another sort of thing!” said the doctor, irritably, and took up the newspaper.

“Ay, there’s the mischief. I wanted a son. What possessed her to give me daughters? I always hated the notion of a pack of girls.”

Those present laughed; the doctor, however, exclaimed angrily—

"You talk like a fool. There's truth in the saying that nine oxen and one peasant make ten head of cattle."

Whereupon he rose up to go. But now it was the vine-grower's turn to be caustic—

"Better a peasant on wheels than a foot-sore squire," he exclaimed, excitedly; and then after a pause, though the doctor had by this time gone, "All very well for him to preach who's got nothing to do save wag his tongue."

A sympathetic murmur greeted this sally, notwithstanding which suggestions were freely offered from more than one quarter.

On the following Sunday the farmer went over to Fellbach to see his brother-in-law, landlord of the "Bear," the father of Pete and of three other boys. And on the succeeding Tuesday Pete made his appearance at the farm, carrying a little trunk upon his head. In answer to Marie's big eyes of astonishment, the farmer said—

"He'll be stopping now; make him up a bed beside o' mine."

At this news Lena twirled round on her heels with delight. She ran after Marie into the bedroom, exclaiming—

"That's the best thing that could have happened. Pete's my sort. You've only to look at a cheese with him, and he's ready to laugh. Now with you it's always me that needs to set the fun a-going."

* * * *

However, it soon became evident that Pete had been sent for, not to amuse himself with Lena, but to make good to the farmer the son that his wife had denied him. The landlord of the "Bear" had not been over-willing to part with his fair-skinned, strapping firstborn, but the farmer had worked upon his feelings with all manner of arguments. "What think you, Urschi? Look at these four young savages. They'll eat you out of house and home before you've done with them."

Urschi was Pete's stepmother. The three other boys were her own; two of them by a former marriage. There was no denying that they sat down to every meal with formidable appetites, and in Urschi's opinion Pete's consumption of food sometimes went the length of a punishable offence. "Folks is not born greedy; it's a matter of upbringing," she used to say, and her restless black eyes would scan with

disapproval the huge hunks of bread that her stepson made away with. The very notion of allowing a boy like that to carry a big clasp-knife in his trouser-pocket ! That knife, cleaned and polished by Pete with more care than he bestowed on his own face, had before now been a bone of contention—he would rather have swallowed it than let it out of his hands.

Finding Urschi so favourable to his scheme, the farmer next set himself to get round his brother—a more difficult task that. The black-locked louts brought him by his second wife were not to be named with Pete in point of strength and sturdiness. But what sacrifice will a man not make for a quiet hearth ! Urschi strove and struggled for her own brood, who could have but scanty prospects in the way of future inheritance. Now here was a capital opening for Pete.

"Your boy can wed my girl Marie," said the farmer ; "my wife spoke of it when she lay dying. He'll pay off Lena, and then the place'll be his own once I'm out o' the way."

"Who knows but you'll be for taking another wife?" suggested the other, eyeing him narrowly.

"Not I! I've had enough of one," said the farmer, stoutly.

And so the thing was settled, Pete's father explaining to him why he had to go to Hofen.

The lad went not unwillingly, though he had lived on good terms with his stepbrothers, and must now be subject to feminine authority. That he stood in his step-mother's way he recognised, even though she did not say it in so many words. And then to have to do with a girl who would one day become his wife and bring him a fine property, was not such a bad look-out. When he got to Hofen he at once surveyed things—even Marie, who pleased him considerably—with the eye of prospective ownership. She indeed looked womanly and sedate enough to marry there and then. But as it happened she was only just fourteen and a half, and on the eve of confirmation.

"I say, do you mind how I got up into the cherry-tree that day?" he asked her as they sat in front of the house one evening.

Marie nodded, and then they told Lena about it, who had not been a witness at the time, having in fact not yet come into existence. Pete,

as a four-year-old boy, was on a visit to Hofen with his then living mother. The children were summoned to dinner, he and the three-year-old Marie; but they were nowhere to be found. Presently his mother, coming into Marie's room, finds him in her bed, she sitting by and uttering no word.

"What ails the boy?" she cries, rushing forward in alarm.

"He's got hurt," said Marie; "I've tucked him up well."

Then the mother notices that Pete's little hand is all smeared, and that resting on the thick coverlet it grasps—three cherries on one stalk.

"Marie!" exclaims the frightened mother, "tell me what has the boy been doing?"

"He was gathering, and I reading," said Marie, and pointed under the bed; "we've a whole basket of cherries down there."

Lena clapped her hands.

"But you're forgetting the best part," said Pete, complacently. "My arm was broke, but I didn't howl. Mother used often to tell me how I wouldn't let go of the cherries out of my right hand at the doctor's."

"Did she also tell you how the doctor said, 'You'd better brace up his breeches pretty tight, or you'll

have him climbing over his father's head next '?" said Marie, playfully.

Pete appeared not to hear this observation. "Those were good cherries," he said, musing ; and with the air of a connoisseur he added, "They're always nicest fresh gathered ; but girls don't know how to climb."

"If girls don't climb, anyhow they don't tumble and break their bones," laughed Marie.

But the lad was now launched upon a favourite theme, and quietly proceeded—

"My father's of the same mind. He says it's a bad business to be a girl. A girl or a cow can only look on. She can't climb a tree, she can't ride, she's no good at farm work. I'd just like to understand what girls are in the world for."

Marie glanced up as though she were minded to say something ; but her eyes straightway returned to her knitting.

Lena sprang to her feet and called angrily to Blackie, "You're right, old dog ; bark at him, then ! Stupid fellow that he is—a regular ninny !" And she excited the wolf-dog to a furious bark. The colour rose in her face, she clenched her fists, stamped with her feet, gasping and

rolling her eyes the while till her cousin was ready to die of laughing.

"Go it, Lena ; keep it up, spit-fire !" he shouted ; "it's just rare fun to watch you."

Of a sudden her rough little hand was among his locks, tugging with might and main. "Now you know what girls are there for !" she cried, intrepidly.

Pete sat passive in his amazement, and only gave his tumbled hair a slight shake when the angry little creature drew back her hand.

"You're a regular fury," he said, wondering at her. "But, to be sure, small streams are quick to overflow."

"Small folk are folk none the less," retorted Lena, promptly.

"I'm off to see after supper," said Marie, getting up. "You'll have made peace by then, I'm thinking."

And so, indeed, it proved ; but fresh altercations arose next day. The two seemed to take pleasure in their differences. If Marie were not by, it would occasionally go the length of blows. Pete had got over his first surprise, and though he supposed himself to be merely hitting out in play, a red mark would often be left on the little

cousin's brown arm. She paid slight heed ; at the moment, however, the pain sometimes brought tears to her eyes. Pete was rude enough to make fun of these memorials of prowess.

"You've got more bruises than one can count," he mocked one day, pulling the plaits of her hair. Marie was away at her confirmation class, and the two were alone together in the room.

Lena gave a light laugh. "They'll be gone before my wedding-day."

"Before your wedding-day?" The lad opened wide his eyes. "Who would wed such a stupid girl?"

"None would wed such a stupid boy," she retorted, sharply.

"Think so? But I'm to have Marie."

"And who's for me?" asked the little one, anxiously expectant.

"You! You'll get nothing!" shouted Pete, with insulting laughter. "You'll be an old maid!"

Lena gazed at him in deadly fear. Her lower lip trembled violently. In vain did the stubborn little mouth set itself to avoid sobbing. Then she ran to the bench near the stove, thrust herself into the corner

of it, drew up her knees, wrapped her hands in her apron, and remained in that attitude, a picture of quiet despair. "I'm like to die of vexation," she murmured.

The cousin sat hacking a chip of wood with his beloved clasp-knife. He was whistling, and did not trouble to look round. At length he managed to cut his finger, and went to hold the bleeding wound close under her weebegone eyes.

"Haven't you got a linen rag? Any small thing will do."

The child sprang quickly up to look for the desired object, which she handed him without looking his way.

"Have you a bit of thread as well, Lena?"

Then she wrapped the rag about his outstretched finger, and tied the thread firmly round it; in doing which she was obliged to let him see her swollen eyes.

"Eh, but you're a regular bit of womankind. Womenkind are for ever turning on the waterworks," said Pete, feelingly.

This method of comfort failing of its purpose, he clapped her encouragingly on the shoulder. "Don't fret, Lena, I'll take the pair of you."

"What are you raving about? Two wives! That's no good," said the little one, sadly.

"It answers among the Turks. The Turks go in for having several wives," Pete informed her with a learned air.

A ray of hope shot over Lena's flushed little face. With one finger pressed against her lip she looked thoughtfully at him.

"I'll become a Turk," shouted Pete, enjoying his own inspiration. "Then I can have as many wives as ever I like. I'll have a score of them, or maybe more."

But at this Lena's grief gave way to an outburst of wrath.

"Shame upon you!" she exclaimed. "It's disgraceful to have twenty wives."

"If I've got to be a Turk, I may as well be one in right earnest," bragged the boy; and Lena had to content herself with the mournful prospect of some day becoming one of twenty.

* * * *

The day of Marie's confirmation was drawing near—a day to which she had looked forward with vague yearning. By means of it, the minister had explained, one became a member of the Christian commu-

nion. One's own reason and free will brought it about : it was not as when a helpless, unthinking infant is received in baptism. Marie regarded the Christian communion as a solemn mystery. For her an odour of sanctity pervaded everything that bore relation to her church ; the very edifice had from her earliest days represented all that her imagination could conjure up of noblest and most beautiful. The high-arched, sober enclosure, in such marked contrast to the cramped, low-ceilinged rooms at home ; the peculiar smell of books and dry dust of which one was conscious there, to the exclusion of any breath from field or stall ; the chairs fixed in their place, so that not even the unruliest urchin could shift them—all this gave her an unwonted sense of a sanctuary secure against noise, harshness, and the base and unlovely conditions from which her austere young soul recoiled. Here might not enter coarse laughter or drunken shouting, the blight of scandal or the cancer of envy ; here was heard the organ's full deep peal, and the voice of him who ranked highest in the village—their minister. His words, even if their full import did not

always reach Marie, were yet lofty words, such as none but himself made use of. He spoke of love, faith, a godly life, holiness, and peace. This was the house of God ; here God abode. No herd was here, no implement that served the daily life. Everything was other than at home, God only being served. A thrill would pass through the girl when the final benediction was being spoken—
“ The Lord bless and preserve you ; the Lord make His countenance to shine upon you and give you peace.”
She dared not raise her eyes, but she distinctly felt the Presence. His Being was above, and peace entered her soul.

The minister liked while he was preaching to watch her meditative face with its rapt expression. It was a small face. The eyes were almost overpoweringly large ; many times they had a fixed, unillumined look. But there would be days upon which those eyes were well-nigh more than the minister could bear. “ It’s a lucky thing she has got her hands full of work,” he would then think ; “ meditation is all very well, but she might be led into a mistaken course.”

The confirmation day arrived. Marie had not slept the night before ; she looked paler even than her wont, and when she entered the church with the others it must have struck many a one that life could never be plain sailing to this young being. Pretty she assuredly was, in spite of the disfiguring arrangement of her hair. The rich, smooth, fair tresses had been dragged back from the white brow with painful tightness, and fastened by a black velvet band. They hung upon her neck in two solid tails, so firmly plaited that as she walked they could scarcely be seen to move. In a clear treble voice she uttered her responses, a tender pink flush overspreading her face at each. Quite at her ease, and without stumbling, yet in the same half-drawling, exercise voice as the other children, she repeated her part out of the catechism ; only on none of the other faces did there lie her look of eager expectation. During the sermon, in which the minister spoke of the new life about to dawn for the young Christians, her eye never left the preacher's face, and she turned upon him a great gaze of inquiry, under which he felt him-

self grow restless. Then came the benediction. With bowed heads the children knelt before the altar. The minister distributed texts and verses, reciting to each child respectively an appointed text, and then handing her a written copy. When Marie's turn came round, the minister, blessing her with outstretched hands, said, "God loveth a cheerful giver." And then followed the opening lines of the hymn—

"An angel speeds on silent way
Across the land,
From God's own hand
Brings balm our sorrows to allay.
His presence makes men strong to bear
Their heaven-sent lot,
Repining not ;
Oh, follow ye him everywhere."

When the child stood up she gazed in tearful disappointment at the leaflet in her hand, and stepped back with a sudden movement.

The minister beckoned to her. "Come to me after dinner, dear child," he said kindly.

She hardly knew how to wait for the moment when with shy tread she might enter his book-filled study. The minister was walking slowly to and fro when she got in, half obscured by the blue clouds

that issued from his pipe. He scrutinised her inquiringly, and paused in his walk to say—

“Well, Marie, you didn't take it all in to-day, I'm thinking.”

There was a touch of defiance in the vehement shake of her head.

“I don't know—all that about a new life—I can't begin a new life,” she faltered, timidly.

“Speak out fearlessly, child,” said the clergyman, and laid down his pipe.

“Why, I can't”—she pressed her hands together as though she were holding something tightly in them—“I surely can't go and forget my mother,” she whispered, and looked up with beseeching eyes.

The minister cleared his throat. “Nobody asks you to, Marie,” he said, “but still you have to remember that your filial duty extends not only to your dead mother but also to your living father. Perform the one, and do not leave undone the other, dear child.”

“I already do what I have got to do,” she said, softly.

“Yes, yes, I know ; you are good and hard-working, and you spare your father the necessity of a house-keeper. But what are we told ? God loveth a cheerful giver, Marie.

What you give, see that you give it cheerfully. The thing is to be cheerful even in toil and trouble."

"I can't get over my heartache," said the poor child, with brimming eyes.

Warmly and sympathetically the minister exclaimed—

"Your mother's well out of it, Marie. Don't grudge her her rest. What she went through with that cross-grained husband who'd not a good word for a creature——" He broke off, annoyed at his own unguarded words, and continued in gentle tones, "When she looks down from heaven upon her children, just think how it would please her to hear a hearty laugh from her Marie."

And he himself smiled in very sympathy, and his whole heart went out to the girl standing there before him with her wistful face.

"If it be God's will," murmured Marie. "I'm much beholden to you, sir." And with that she slipped away.

Thereupon the minister straightway opened his door and called to his wife that he must quite specially commend to her this strange girl.

"Lena is far more to my taste,

she's so likeable and obliging," said that lady. "Marie doesn't attach herself to any one. She's a thoroughly good girl, but terribly reserved ; one has to wring the words out of her."

"Well, but all the same——" persisted her husband.

Marie waited in a state of perturbation that evening for her sister and cousin to go to bed, when she and her father would be left alone. Lena generally began to get sleepy at an early hour, for she was on the move all day like any sparrow, but just this very night Pete chanced to be so talkative that she remained sitting with sparkling eyes in spite of her father's significant yawns. At length he dismissed the three of them with a peremptory order. Marie, however, turned back, and, stepping nearer than she generally ventured to do, said—

"Father, I want to speak to you."

The farmer stood open-mouthed upon hearing this. Marie's eyes fell as she faltered—

"Father, the minister was saying that God loveth a cheerful giver."

The farmer's mouth closed with a jerk. Then he recovered himself.

"I think you might begin to be content by this. Didn't I let you have your mother's black gown? A girl such as you hasn't got no call to whine; her victuals are found her. But you seem to fancy there's to be nothing but holidays."

Marie reddened. "That's not what I was meaning, father," she said, abashed. "The giver—that should be myself. It's I that have got to become a cheerful giver."

The farmer laughed aloud. "You're a fool, my girl!" But then, looking mistrustfully at her, he added, freezingly, "You can go to the parson to-morrow morning and ask him what's owing. I've got it ready."

"I'll go," said Marie; "but, father, it was something else I wanted to say. I will do my duty cheerfully now." Shyly she put out her hand to touch his; her eyes overflowed.

But her father saw neither the hand nor the twitching face that expressed the pain of not being able to make clear its meaning. He had taken a piece of silver from his pocket, and was turning it round and round. He pulled out a bit of paper and wrapped the coin up with deliberation. "A precious lot of

money, come to think of it," he muttered ; " wouldn't mind turning parson myself at that rate." Then he thrust the coin back into his pocket. " It'll do to-morrow ; you might lose it," he said.

Marie went sadly to her room, where Lena was placidly sleeping. She slipped under the coverlet beside her little sister, and turned with her promise to her heavenly Father, the kindly gravity of whose far-reaching, penetrating eye she seemed to feel upon her as she lay. " I will try, Thou knowest what," she murmured within herself, and beneath that radiant, answering gaze from above she fell asleep.

* * * *

The years passed on, obliterating the difference of age between the sisters. Since her cousin had formed part of the household, Marie, relieved of undivided toil, had grown physically more robust. She could now, too, not merely smile, but laugh outright at Lena's pranks. Yet inwardly she remained much as she had ever been, appearing scarcely to belong to the comrades of her own generation with whom she had once sat at school together. Her abiding, never-failing comfort lay in her close, trustful

communion with God. Whatever befell she accepted as His sending, piously and unmurmuring : her father's ill temper ; hailstorms and spoilt crops ; the loss of the favourite cow ; yes, even the withering of her little myrtle-tree, which Lena wept over, interpreting it as a dreadful omen. Her capacity of suffering was perhaps for the time exhausted, a result of what she had gone through after her mother's death. She would preserve self-control, and be able to soothe and counsel, when all around her were lamenting and bewailing their lot.

The monotony of their life called forth many complaints from Lena. When, at the age of eighteen, Pete entered upon his three years' service as a volunteer, she broke out weeping on the subject of Marie's silences and their never going anywhere, not so much as a step out of the house. Thereupon Marie took her next Sunday to Fellbach to call on her uncle, whom she had not visited for a considerable time. Their aunt greeted them coolly enough ; her watchful black eyes strove anxiously to divine the true explanation of the visit. Irritated, Lena whispered her sister that Urschi had come to meet them in a

torn jacket, and that surely she had given up washing her face this long while past. The two elder of the black, shock-headed boys stood stiffly against the wall, looking like a pair of begrimed snow-men, and not knowing whether to shake hands or run away. Only the youngest, who was some six years of age, placed himself, finger in mouth, before the new-comers, and stared wonderingly at them. For Marie had brought him a cake, and he waited to see what might yet follow.

At length the uncle himself joined them. He wore a soiled shirt and sat down rather inarticulately opposite the girls. Urschi produced wine and then a loaf. Upon the table in their best parlour might be seen wet rings left by tumblers that had stood there. Innumerable flies and wasps buzzed about the heads of the assembled party.

In the midst of this unsavoury muddle Lena's sauciness came back to her, and she made them all laugh. Even the shockheaded urchins relaxed into a spasmodic grin, though on being looked at they quickly resumed their snow-man posture.

A milk-pail stood in the corner. Lena nudged her sister and pointed to the green film upon its surface. Then she asked her aunt—

“Eh, what’s that? Is it for the pigs?”

“You’ve a nice way of talking, certainly,” croaked the woman, with a bitter laugh. “It’s for butter, I tell you.”

“Heaven preserve me from such butter!” said Lena, frankly, and turned her little nose aside.

Urschi now retreated into the background, abandoning the nieces to her husband, who uttered a word now and again, as if he wished to be friendly but didn’t quite know how to set about it.

“Come, girls, eat,” he said at length, and opened the stove, which was full of sliced pears and dried prunes.

The girls attacked them; but Lena straightway uttered a cry, and threw her slice away with a gesture of disgust. “I’ve gone and bitten a beetle!”

She stooped down and looked into the oven. Yea, verily. Crowds of cockroaches were careering about among the dried fruit. Lena began to chase and massacre them; the boys joined in the fray.

Marie meanwhile slipped out into the garden, which was in almost as neglected a condition as the house. She gathered a little posy of mignonette, and stroked the cat that stared at her shyly and strangely with its green eyes as though no one had ever before caressed it. At length Lena joined her, flushed and hot.

"A new sort of amusement," she exclaimed. "I must have killed at least two hundred of them."

"I think we'll be going," said Marie.

"We might just as well stop a bit now," urged the younger girl; "she can't get any crosser than she is by this. After all, he is Pete's father."

"Out of this house he has come," thought Marie to herself.

Then they were summoned to coffee. They sat down eight round a big pot of that beverage; the uncle dipped his bread into it; all the others followed suit.

"Thank you, we don't drink coffee," said the girls. "It turns my stomach," whispered Lena.

On their leaving, their uncle accompanied them a bit of the way.

"My Pete has a good time of it—better than his father," he said to

Marie. "You've grown a comely lass." His small eyes twinkled approval of her person. "When he comes back it'll be the wedding," he continued ; "seems long, eh?"

"I'm in no hurry," answered Marie, composedly. "Good-bye, uncle."

It was October, but bright still and warm, with a dark blue sky setting off the yellow brilliance of the vineyards. But the fruit plantations through which they passed wore a dead look ; most of the leaves had fallen, those that remained hung speckled and discoloured on the plundered boughs. The sisters sat down upon a ridge where purple scabions and dandelions were still blossoming.

"Look at that bee," said Marie, "it's not troubling its head about winter."

"I say, let's pluck grasses," and Lena began rooting out the blades.

"Pluck grasses? What's the good of that?"

"To see who'll be first to marry."

"Ah," said Marie, smiling, "I suppose I'll need to be thinking of it first ; in six months Pete will be free."

"Why, look here," cried Lena, in astonishment, "I've got the longest

one ! It'll be my turn first." And she began to spring about and laugh till she made Marie laugh too.

"You stupid thing," said the elder sister, "you're in too great a hurry ; think what six months is ; you can hardly settle it as quick as that."

"Why not ? Why should you grudge me that ? I don't grudge you yours," answered Lena, in pique ; but then her head dropped. "I don't believe in my luck, though," she said ; "it's just crossed my mind that I spilled salt yesterday : that's throwing my lover away—no chance for me now."

"Lose the gain, save the pain," comforted Marie.

"Ain't I just glad that I've no stepmother," said Lena that evening at home. "It would suffocate me to live in such filth as hers."

"She was a thorn in Pete's side," put in Marie.

"Pete ! You're for ever thinking of your Pete. The livelong day it's just Pete and Pete !" cried Lena, tugging violently at a knotted string.

"Nothing of the sort," insisted Marie, taken aback. "You're sleepy, and I, too, begin to feel tired."

"Don't talk such stuff!" began Lena, snappishly, but broke off and climbed quickly into bed, burying her hot cheeks deep in her pillow. Suddenly she thrust forward her head, cried "It's you that are *my* stepmother!" and as quickly lay down again.

"You peppery thing," said Marie, quietly, "sleep away your tantrums, and to-morrow you'll tell me what harm I've done you."

By next day, indeed, they had both forgotten their tiff.

* * * *

The following Easter Pete's time of service was up, and he came back. But the wedding was not to take place till the autumn. With country people summer is too busy a season for festivities.

Military drill had made another man of Pete. His rather stumpy nose had lengthened out; a moustache, fair as the hair of his head, feathered his upper lip; he bore himself erect, and walked with firm tread and an air of self-assurance.

"You go along like a strutting cock," said Marie, smiling; "you've grown into a man."

Lena contemplated her reflection in his shining buttons.

"It's a real pity you've got to leave off wearing a uniform," she remarked ; "I like to see you in it."

Upon which he began a recital of his hardships and drudgery, his skill in shooting and general prowess, his duties as sentryman on pitch dark nights, the parades and manœuvres, and, to wind up, an account of his and his companions' pranks in barracks. Of these last, however, the girls failed for the most part to seize the point, even after he had explained it to them ; so he soon repaired to the alehouse, where he found a more understanding public, and Lena was very angry with him, and predicted that he would come home the worse. This prediction was, alas, fulfilled, after which Lena would not vouchsafe him a word—anyhow, not a friendly word. She looked at him defiantly whenever the chance arose, ran him down to her father, and would gladly have set Marie against him too ; but the latter only said—

"Those are men's ways nowadays. He's like the rest of them. One has to accept the things that God has willed."

The arrival of her betrothed had not greatly disturbed her equanimity ; she looked after him almost like a

wife, and even walked hand in hand with him through the fields on a Sunday. But once, when he wanted to pull her behind a bush and kiss her, she said, "Time enough for that after the wedding"; and when he persisted, she shoved him not too gently aside: "Get along with you! What are you about? Are you afraid I'm to be running away from you, Pete?"

"Marie's uncommon stubborn," complained Pete once to her father. "I shall have trouble with her yet."

But the old man straightened his bent form with a jerk, made a clucking sound with his tongue, and said—

"Her like's not got for the asking. If I were you—— There's no sweet, mind you, where there ain't no sour." And his small eyes winked so significantly at his prospective son-in-law that Pete's spirits rose again.

"I shall bring her to reason," he said.

"Ah, my boy, you know there ain't never been but three good women—one of 'em ran out of the world, the second was drowned, the third's still to seek. And, take it all in all, the farm's worth a tidy sum."

The sisters set out one Sunday afternoon in August to gather raspberries. There was a broad strip of ground against the vineyard wall where the bushes were thick with fruit. Even in unfavourable seasons, when the yield of the vines was below the average, there would yet be a goodly crop from these bushes. The glebe-farmer had long opposed their cultivation, but the minister had at length persuaded him to institute this profitable new departure. In his obstinate fashion, however, he still gave little heed to the plantation; that was the girls' province every bit as much as were the white narcissus flowers that they grew in a spare corner of the vineyard. The girls liked to be up here, high above the road, high above the Neckar, whose green waters rushed at this point in little glistening rapids over unseen rocks. In spring, when the whole valley lay robed in white blossoms, it was lovely, from beneath the pink glow of a peach-tree, to listen to the blackbird's call, to watch the swallows as they skimmed the surface of the river with their pointed wings, or, soaring aloft, appeared to lose themselves in the blue of heaven. To-day the scene was enchanting. Everything

lay sun-suffused and glowing, the evening light turning red to purple, yellow to gold. The blackbirds were singing again, but no tender spring breeze now held sway in the air. Through the sunlit dust the strong passion-laden scent of white lilies was shed abroad ; they bloomed in every vineyard, in every garden, every types of beauty itself as they lifted their proud, defenceless heads.

Marie watered her lilies, taking an occasional glance at the mirror-like surface of the weir. Lena stood lower down and watched the passers-by crossing each other along the dusty river path. Those who were setting out looked fresh and unstained ; the home-comers trudged along with bunches of flowers in their hands, hatless, coatless, and red-faced, uttering loud snatches of song. Lena craned her neck. What comical-looking hats and gowns kept passing there ! Often she was moved to laugh aloud. A teasing or flattering word would now and again be tossed up to her. The winsome maiden presented a pleasing vision to the passers-by as she stood there on her high-raised platform, her brown curly hair gleaming in the evening light, her

clear, childish profile sharply defined against a background of deep blue.

One raw young fellow, who carried a paint-box in his hand, actually stood still, and, after indulging in a prolonged upward look, began to unpack his apparatus upon the narrow strip of grass. Lena gazed down in vague surprise. When presently she proceeded to take a bright-tinted apricot out of the basket beside her and to set her teeth in it, the young fellow shouted, "Keep still, now!" and began to ply his brushes. Then Lena turned crimson, flung the fruit back into the basket and vanished with lightning speed. "Come along, Marie; let's be going," she cried, quite audibly; "there's too many loafers down there by half." They took their baskets, now filled with raspberries and apricots, covered them carefully with vine leaves, and one behind the other descended the long narrow steps that led sharply down between the vineyard walls by a little side-way to the crowded river path.

"Just see how yellow these melons have begun to turn," said Marie, and stopped to look at the shining globes that overhung the wall with their

long rows of big-leaved, coiling wreaths.

And the wall itself—how full of life it was! Delicate green-grey lichen sprang from every crevice, and the graceful Syrian rue covered wide surfaces with its pale lilac blossoms.

Lena had as usual run on in front. Suddenly, as she set foot to the ground, an unpleasing sound of laughter grated on her ear, and an impudent voice called out, "All right, my lass; come a bit nearer; want to make things easy for me, eh?"

It was the art-student of her recent encounter who accosted her in this barefaced fashion. He held the painting-box in one hand, with the other he put up his eye-glass. A repellent smirk distorted his beardless face. Lena looked at him, and said—

"You're surely not in your right wits that you go and close up the road in that impudent fashion against me!"

"Aha! 'not in my right wits,' and 'impudent fashion!' You're an ill-bred hussy," shouted the young fellow, and planted himself straight in front of her so as to bar her passage.

"You've no business to talk to me like that!" retorted the girl; and turning back up two of the steps, she called to her sister, "Marie, this man is tipsy, tell him to let us through."

"Tipsy? That's what you say, eh?" cried the fellow, who clearly was not quite sober. "Wait a bit, you shall make amends to me, though." And he seized Lena by the arm, causing some of her fruit to roll out of the basket upon the ground.

"You'll please let my sister be!" cried Marie, stepping hastily down.

But what did that avail? The narrow passage, where only a single person at a time could pass, shut them in helplessly one behind the other. The impudent youth completely barred the exit. Scarcely a passer-by looked up, and such as did made sure that nothing beyond a little harmless teasing was being carried on.

Anger overcame Lena. "Take your ugly face away!" she cried, and struck him suddenly upon the chest.

Only a second did he pause, then grasped the girl round her body, and thrust his pursed-up lips against her face, which she kept turning from side to side. Marie, who had

slid down by means of the wall, tried to extricate her sister. It looked as if a regular scuffle must ensue. At that moment, however, a hand seized the shoulder of the embryo painter, and a voice called out—

“I thought it was fun, or I'd have come sooner. Out of the road there, young sir,” and with a firm grip he thrust him away from the foot of the steps.

The offender stumbled backwards, treading as he went upon his colour-box, which gave a sharp crack under his foot. In alarm he stooped down over his damaged property.

“Now,” said the stranger, a town-clad young man of grave and pleasing aspect, “the way is clear.”

The girls did not wait to be told a second time, but pushed on hurriedly. When they had walked a few steps Marie turned once again, saying in her gentle voice—

“I thank you kindly.”

“And I too,” echoed Lena.

Then they both blushed, for the stranger had lifted his hat and saluted them as one salutes young ladies. Lena went chuckling all the way home over the discomfited youth who had smashed his own property.

"I am right glad," she kept repeating. "But the other was a nice fellow, eh, Marie?" she continued, with animation. "Why, look you, there he goes, Marie; he'll be making for the 'Star.'"

But the stranger walked past the beautiful garden of the "Star," with its grey ruin, without entering the inn itself, and his slight form presently vanished among the houses.

"He's got some visit to pay, I suppose," assumed Lena. "I say, Marie, that's not one of the common sort. I wouldn't refuse the like of him—a real gentleman as he is, and so full of pluck."

"What honest eyes he had!" said Marie, pensively; "but what I liked best was his not saying an unnecessary word. Yes, he's a good sort."

Then they trudged home chatting about their adventure, and Lena wanted at once to tell it all to her cousin as soon as ever he came in from the "Star." He, however, paid little heed, saying carelessly—

"Ah, just one of those woman-hunters; I know the style of thing. They swarm at Stuttgart. In King Street one sees them about with eye-glasses cocked on their noses. Easy enough to tackle, for the most part; they're seldom dangerous."

He concluded by sagely advising them to call him at once if the fellow came back again, lazily extending his strong arms as he spoke. They did not recur to the theme of their deliverer. Marie hardly knew why, but she preferred not to mention him.

* * * *

Next morning she set off early with her raspberries to the carpenter's ; to have the juice pressed out in the turning-lathe is so convenient, saving elaborate appliances and much expenditure of time. And old Dietz had always been very willing to render her this service. But to-day, as she opened the workshop door, she beheld a new-comer at work there, and, surprised, remained standing a moment upon the threshold.

"Is the master not within ?" she asked, hesitating.

The young workman came towards her holding his plane on which the bright yellow shavings hung curling.

"Is it anything that I can do ?" he asked, modestly.

Then their eyes met, and they recognised one another. To-day he was wearing no light summer coat, but stood there in snowy shirt-

sleeves and coloured braces—looking none the worse on that account, Marie told herself. On the contrary, the bronzed and slender neck rose with such fine effect from its white setting, the crisp black hair lay so thick and glossy over the well-shapen head, that Marie's admiration made her forget to speak, and she gazed at him blushing and smiling. She failed, however, to perceive that he on his part was every bit as much absorbed in contemplating her. There was little of the peasant-girl about her. The sun had not tanned her skin, nor had work caused her features to grow heavy and blunted. The large light-grey eyes had rather a wistful expression ; the smooth hair, the delicate bloom of the cheeks, and the small, firm-set mouth, made up a pleasing whole. Something of pathos mingled with the charm. The young man appeared to be moved by her presence. His eyes remained fixed upon her as he rather shyly answered—

“I'm the master's godson. He has got a big order to carry out, and as I am now a free agent, he asked me to come and help him. He's not in this moment—what is there you may be wanting ? ”

"Oh," said Marie, smiling, "it's not exactly what you would reckon carpenter's work. They're raspberries I've got in here, and—the master he knows about it; I can wait a bit."

But it appeared that the young carpenter, too, was up to this wrinkle of squeezing out raspberries in a turning-lathe, and it was easy to see how anxious he was to oblige.

"My mother gets it done in the same way," he said, while he attentively watched the girl as she shook the red fruit out of a dish into a white cloth, here and there rescuing a berry that was about to roll over the edge, and laying it among the others with her taper fingers.

"Taste them," urged Marie, cordially. "I got them myself; they're real good to eat."

So from time to time he slipped a berry into his mouth that gleamed forth as red and bright as the fruit itself from his short, dark beard.

"Why," thought Marie, silently making this same observation, "I'm not given to studying the looks of men in that way; I must be very wanting in modesty." And she blushed at her own thought and turned her eyes away. But not for many seconds. The young man

seemed to her so little of a stranger ; it was as though they had long held converse together.

Not that he said very much. Only it impressed her that he spoke again several times of his mother, and always as of a person of consequence so to say, one time quoting her words, another telling how it cost him a pang to leave her again so soon, even though it were but for half a year—"One could never know what might happen when folks were weakly and no longer young."

The cloth containing the raspberries was now screwed in ; Marie squatted upon the ground near her dish to watch the bright, sweet juice run into it. Cautiously the young carpenter increased the pressure, looking down from time to time at the blonde head from which the white kerchief had slipped backwards upon the neck. The whole workshop was filled with the fragrance of raspberry juice, and both were thinking—"If there had but been ten times the quantity !"

Said he to himself : "It is so pleasantly cool here, especially if one is not obliged to be planing. Outside the heat is enough to give one a sunstroke, and a little job like this

fruit-pressing is a real boon by comparison with other work."

At last, however, the fruit was all pressed dry. The little cloth that held the skins had been wrung into a red rag, and the girl gazed admiringly at her dish of syrup.

"Looks as bright as blood, doesn't it?" she remarked.

To her surprise she received no answer, and as she raised a look of inquiry to her friendly helper, she was frightened at the sight of his sudden pallor and downcast head.

"If only you'd not said that!" he murmured, and the altered and deeply melancholy tone in which he uttered these words went to her heart. "It has spoiled all my pleasure," he added.

"There are people, sure enough, who can't bear the sight of blood," said Marie, half to herself.

The young man shook his head.

"It's a wretched story. I was the cause of blood being spilled; I've got a human life on my conscience," he said, gloomily.

A shudder passed through the girl; but a moment later she exclaimed, in accents of conviction, "By your own doing? Nay, I'll never believe that——" And half mechanically she reseated herself

upon the shavings by the turning-lathe as if it were not yet time to go home.

“ I’ll tell you how it came about,” said the young workman.

He stood before this unknown girl like a penitent at the confessional, leaning upon his hand, his eyes downcast.

“ I couldn’t tell it to any one, but there’s something in your face—well, I feel as if I might unburden my heavy heart. There was a girl, then, that I cared a lot about ; she was a cousin down in VeiHINGE, a sensible, tidy sort of girl. Well, when I’d only just become a journeyman, the time of military service came on. There was no escape, and I had to serve. In the second year on Christmas Eve, I got leave of absence, and we were engaged, down at Esslinge where Rikele was staying at her god-mother’s ; we had a right merry time of it.” He passed the back of his hand over his eyes ; his face twitched nervously. “ Well, within six months of that I was declared free. It came quite unexpected like—a reward for good conduct they called it in my certificate. Wasn’t I glad, just ! I said never a word, nor wrote a line ; I wanted to sur-

prise them. First my mother in Veihinge yonder ; and then I was in such impatience to get to Rikele at Esslinge that I didn't bide half an hour at home. I'd been for ever thinking of Rikele, and the pleasure and surprise of my stroke of luck. So I got to Esslinge, and rushed to the market-place where her god-mother's house stood. While I was still far off I looked up at the top floor of the house, and there was Rikele on the window-sill, half inside and half out, busy cleaning the windows."

He heaved a deep sigh. Marie sat listening with folded hands, and a frightened look in her wide-open eyes.

"Then, as often happens, some evil power put it into me to shout up 'Rikele!' Like lightning she turns her little head. I see that she knows me ; she turns red and then white, and leaves go. 'Don't fall, Rikele!' I shrieked out, in deadly fear, and sprang forward, for I saw her losing balance. Next minute she was lying on the pavement——"

The young fellow covered his face ; the girl's tears flowed fast.

"Was there no hope for her ?" she asked, softly.

"She never stirred. She just gave one sigh and was gone ;" and he added, sorrowfully, "If I had but written to her, the misfortune would never have happened. That thought leaves me no peace. That's how I came to learn who is the ruler of life and death."

"The Lord will bring you comfort," said the girl, after a long pause.

"Seems to me He ought to have sent His angels to hold poor Rikele," he replied, moodily.

"No sparrow falls from the roof save by His will," rejoined Marie, earnestly. The Biblical expressions and images rose familiarly to her lips ; they had ever been her source of comfort.

But the young man exclaimed impatiently, "Preserve me from believing that it was God's will ! I could never bring myself to pray to Him again."

In the presence of so great a grief Marie grew silent. Only after a while did she whisper to herself, "Poor Rikele."

"The minister did say, to be sure, that her end was beautiful," continued the young carpenter, "and it's true enough that she lay there as if in sleep, and even in her coffin

she seemed to smile. She had felt neither terror nor pain, the doctor said. But," and he broke into fresh lamentation, "to think that I was the cause of it all—that her young life was lost through me!"

Slowly the girl stood up and took her cloth and the dish of fruit-juice.

"I must be going now," she said, softly.

He was sunk in gloomy meditation. She wanted to add something, but the words died on her lips.

"Ah, are you going already?" he asked.

"Yes. God help you." More she could not utter.

"God bless you. And I thank you kindly," he replied, and looked trustfully into her moist eyes.

"God help you," she said once again, and went; slowly at first, more quickly when she remembered that it was already late, ten o'clock; the church clock had just struck.

"Why, you have been a time," said Lena, in astonishment, as her sister came in. "Twice already has Pete been for his lunch. He was wondering what pond you had fallen into."

"Let him wonder," said Marie, placing her dish upon the table.

"Ah, then you've been at the carpenter's! What was he talking about, then, all this time?" asked Lena, inquisitively.

"Nothing. He wasn't in when I got there."

Marie's answer came forth hesitatingly. Then she hurried into the kitchen. Why had she withheld the truth from her sister? she asked herself. But it had never come naturally to her to make a confidante of Lena. How could she have told her such a history as this? She blushed at the very thought of having to name him. His name! Why, she did not know it herself.

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His face, however, and his voice never left her thoughts. "Poor Rikele," she thought; "it was indeed great happiness you lost. Would that he were less sad, that one might somehow bring him comfort. It must indeed have been God's will, but he cannot believe it because she was so dear to him." Marie mused over the subject of such attachments; in her family nothing of the sort was known. Curious! not even Lena was very devoted to her. It suddenly came back to her how the girl had once exclaimed, "You are *my* step-

mother," and the words now smote her to the heart. They had grown away from one another as the years went by. Perhaps it would become better if Lena also married; she might then know a tender feeling for her husband. After that Marie's thoughts turned to Pete. What would he have said if Rikele's fate had befallen *her*? No, she couldn't imagine, for Pete's coming could by no possibility make any one so frantically glad as to lead to their falling out of the window. That was simply inconceivable. And she began to think of the wonder of there being a joy so great as to make a person leave go in a dangerous position and risk falling just in order to give a sign, a nod. Then across her mind flitted a vague memory of her having clung to her mother's coffin, and of having wanted to stay with her even in the cold ground.

All that day she went about as in a trance. A portal had opened itself to her, but she still stood only upon its threshold, dazzled and confused by the brightness within. Late in the afternoon, when daylight was fast fading, she slipped into the little bedroom which she and Lena shared, unlocked her box,

and took out of it a small case. This was her treasure casket, her shrine of relics. It held her mother's prayer-book ; a cornelian ring which her mother had once brought her from the yearly fair, and which she had long since outgrown ; a dried oak-twigg plucked on the last walk with her teacher after her confirmation ; an unpretentious garnet necklace that had come to her at the death of Pete's own mother ; a letter from the schoolmaster, who on having to go away had once deputed her to instruct some of the youngest and most backward children in reading. As a rule she was wont to go through all these treasures with grave deliberation whenever a free moment threw her together with them ; to-day, however, she turned out the box with a hasty hand, even tossed the lavender and sweet-scented woodrooff carelessly on the ground in order more quickly to get at the underlying memorials of her confirmation. There they were at length : a glossy pink leaflet with a text from the Bible printed upon it ; then another with a picture and verses underneath. These she read eagerly through, though she knew them by heart.

Then, having paused to think a-while, she fetched a small ink bottle and a sheet of paper, and after much careful glancing hither and thither, began in her stiff, unpractised hand to copy out--

“ An angel speeds on silent way
Across the land,
From God's own hand
Brings balm our sorrows to allay.
His presence makes men strong to bear
Their heaven-sent lot,
Repining not ;
Oh, follow ye him everywhere.”

Many times as she wrote did a mist creep over her eyes ; she wiped them with her hand, not noticing the tears that welled up. Once steps came past her door ; then the blood rushed to her face, and she wanted to thrust everything out of sight. But the sound died away, and the last word of the verses was now written. What next ? Long did she deliberate, pushing her sheet of paper to and fro on the window-sill, and looking down vacantly at the little kitchen garden where the beans still bore their fiery red and white blossoms, and moist lettuce beds sent up an earthy fragrance. This was not to be a letter, only he must be made aware that it came from her. So she did as with

verses in an album which she had sometimes had to write. She carefully traced below, "In remembrance of Marie Deininger." She tried to sign her name with a bold flourish, but the pen spluttered in her unpractised hand, scattering a shower of black drops about the signature. In dismay she beheld this misfortune, wondering whether she must write the whole thing over again. It was already growing dark, however; there would not have been time enough, and to-morrow was to be such a full day. So, with some pricks of conscience, she thrust her ill-starred handiwork into a yellowed but unused envelope, the only one she possessed, and proceeded to address it. No easy task that, when the name of the addressee is wanting. She might of course have inquired, but for some reason not quite clear to herself she could not make up her mind to take that step. At last she merely wrote: "To the young joiner who is helping the carpenter Dietz." Her letter must naturally not be confided to the post; no, she would need to deliver it herself. But how? She spent half the night in considering this problem, and rose from her bed even earlier than usual. With

burning cheeks and a beating heart did she make her way to the carpenter's workshop. There unbroken stillness reigned. She looked through the dust-dimmed windows into the workshop on the ground floor ; it was empty. That made her bolder. She gently shook the window sashes. Yes, one of them had been left slightly open this hot night ; she was able to raise it. The turning-lathe beside which she had yesterday stood and listened to the stranger's unhappy love story was placed not far from the window. If she took very careful aim she might perhaps manage to throw her missive as far as that. But her hands trembled, she threw clumsily, and there lay her letter among the wood shavings under the turning-lathe ! Craning her neck she looked in, supporting herself with both hands on the window-sill. All care for precaution had fled from her mind. Then suddenly a door opened, and the young workman entered the shop just opposite to where she stood. He was in his white shirt-sleeves, as she had seen him yesterday. Had he espied her ? So great a terror overcame her at the thought that she could not even have uttered a

cry, and now only ducked hastily down like a wild bird. Then, gathering up her strength, she flew for her life, as she had not done since the days of childhood. The windows of the workshop looked out upon the Neckar ; once round the corner of the house there was no seeing her from it. She never paused in her race, however, but tore along till she reached home, feeling secure only when she had regained the dusk enclosure of her little room, where the rosy-cheeked Lena still lay sleeping. Quickly, as though there were an ill deed to be atoned for, she went into the kitchen and lit the fire. At the door of the wood-shed she encountered Pete, who asked in sleepy wonderment—

“Where on earth have you been to at this hour of night ? ”

The girl took a step backwards—had Pete, then, seen her ?

“I don't know what concern that is of yours,” she said. But she was not quite at her ease.

“You'll have been visiting your sweetheart seemingly,” teased the young man.

“I have no sweetheart,” cried Marie, sharply. “Don't talk such silly stuff.”

"But what am I, then? Am I not your sweetheart?" said Pete, trying to put his arm round her.

"You," said Marie, pushing away his hand—"you will soon be my husband—if God so wills it—that's another matter," she added.

"Ah," muttered Pete, "a good excuse is worth a mint o' money. Now, where have you been gallivanting?" His face assumed a look of sour suspicion.

Within the girl defiance and frankness were at war. "I've been at the carpenter's," she at length said. "Are you satisfied now?"

Thereupon she disappeared into the wood-shed, and began pulling the logs about as if she were anxious to drown all other sound. Her heart beat with an oppression that yet had gladness in it—a hitherto unknown sensation. All day long she kept examining the chairs and benches about the house, to see if they were whole and not in need of some repair. Yes, there were indeed certain damaged articles that ought long since to have been seen to. But courage failed her to take them to the carpenter; once, after reaching his very door, she felt constrained to retrace her steps.

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Next morning she found a little bunch of roses and rosemary lying outside the sill of her window. With trembling hands she tucked it under her neckerchief ; it was for herself only, no one else was meant to see it. "That is in return for the song," she thought ; "ah, if it has but brought him comfort !" And dearly would she have liked to see him, but she considered it quite out of the question that she should go to the workshop any more.

On the following morning there was a fresh posy on the window-sill, and every day for a whole fortnight she found one. Once, as she was returning with Lena from the field, carrying her hoe across her shoulder, they met him. He looked very comely in his neat attire as he courteously raised his big brown straw hat to greet them. Then suddenly she grew flushed and nervous, becoming conscious of her soiled and overheated person ; they had been busy breaking clods all the afternoon. He looked as if he would like to approach them, but were hesitating because of Lena, who was calmly taking stock of him.

"Round this corner," said Marie, and drew her sister quickly away.

"You stupid thing," answered

Lena, indignantly ; "as if that nice fellow were thinking to bite one ! He's living down there at Dietz's ; they call him Wilhelm—but you're for ever curled up like any caterpillar ; it's of no use telling you things."

Marie was, however, listening attentively, and in listening forgot to answer. Perhaps she had no wish to do so. Lena chattered on—

"Pity that he's a carpenter ; and he's got no money, as Dietz's Betty tells. Otherwise he'd have pleased me well enough. Betty, too, would have been ready to think of him, but she says his mouth's in a way to grow all of a piece ; he hardly ever opens it."

"Betty's an ill-natured thing, with her squinting eyes," put in Marie.

"That's what I say," laughed Lena. "He'd talk fast enough to me, just you see if he don't."

"My gracious ! Are you wanting to run after him ?" asked Marie, angry and disturbed.

But wholly unconcerned, Lena laughed and prattled on—"It's not a question of running after him ; only of seeing if his mouth has really grown all of a piece, which would indeed be a pity for such a bonny lad."

They had hardly washed and tidied themselves up at home when Lena seized upon a broken chair and ran out of the room in a state of wild mirth.

"Hand, hand, bite me not! Tooth, tooth, wring me not!" she called to Marie, who stood there with contracted brows, asking herself whether she ought to restrain the girl from going. To what end? Lena was indeed a madcap, but it was not thinkable that she should be guilty of an unseemly act.

A good deal of time went by before Lena returned; it seemed long, at least, to her sister. She appeared less elated than she had shown herself on setting out, and devoted her first attention to the jug of must; it was such hot, thirsty sort of weather, this September.

"Well?" inquired Marie at length, busying herself with the drawer of the table, which she pulled open and slowly closed again.

"Well?" repeated the younger sister, as if she had no idea what was expected of her.

"Did you see him?" Again Marie slowly opened the drawer.

Lena nodded. "Why shouldn't I?"

"What had he to gossip about?"

"Oh, what we talked about?" answered Lena, with a laugh. "Why, about the house, and the weather, and Pete, and Blackie." At the mention of his name the dog sprang at his mistress, wagging his tail. "If he only had a little money," she added, musingly, "one might have something to say to him. I like him well enough."

"How do you know that he likes you?" suggested Marie, rather severely.

"Well, I should think he does. I'm a nice enough girl," said Lena, innocently.

There was no posy on the window-sill next morning.

Marie looked sadly at the empty place. She knew directly that there would never be another. Every evening she had laid the faded one, after wearing it secretly all day, in her little box among her childish treasures. There was quite a high pile by this time, each blossom of which had meant happiness. Nothing on earth had ever yet gladdened her as this silent daily greeting had done. But it had been a sin, she now thought. It was

even wrong that the sender should have found a way into her heart, that his straight, spare figure, gentle eyes, red lips, and winning manners should so greatly have pleased her ; nay, even his mourning and his tears. That the devil walks abroad under guises the most diverse she was well aware. The very things in which we chiefly delight often proceed from him, and are an incitement to wrong-doing. True, she had not yet been guilty of much wrong-doing, but her eye and her soul had delighted in him, she told herself ; else would she not have known all this unrest and fear, would not have shrunk from naming him and speaking about him. That had been wrong. Then before the empty place upon her window-sill she uttered a fervent prayer that God might turn her heart away from him ; but in between she felt with burning joy how dear he was, how near and how dear, and how never again could she forget him.

On the following day she heard her and Pete's marriage banns published for the first time. She sat in a place that enabled her clearly to see her cousin. He looked just as he had always done as a lad, with

his freckled, clownishly-shrewd face. No brother could be more intimately understood by her. When his name was pronounced, he drew himself stiffly erect, like a school-boy during roll-call; or was the movement a survival of military drill? He seemed nowise embarrassed; if anything, on the contrary, too self-possessed. Was not the glebe-farmer one of the richest men in the village?

That afternoon Lena said with lips thrust out, "Wilhelm is no longer there. He's always having business to see to at Stuttgart, Betty says. But it's all one to me, for I fancy his ways are none of the straightest." And Marie making no response, she continued, "He has not kept company with any one, but he has had a secret sweetheart all the same. For Betty says he gathered flowers and set off with them in the small hours of the morning. She saw him do it twice. Then she spoke to him about it, and he took no notice, trickster that he is."

Marie had bent low over her sewing. Sorrow and a furtive smile, pallor and blushes, succeeded one another upon her countenance. She was relieved when her father's

entrance made an end of Lena's chatter.

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Some weeks later came the Sunday of her wedding. Marie had cooked and baked for this occasion, in due observance of prescribed usage.

"There's just no end to it," said the glebe-farmer to his sister-in-law, between whom and himself a particularly good understanding had arisen.

Urschi looked even sallow than usual. She had been ill for some weeks past.

"I made sure it was the churchyard I was bound for," she groaned, as she dragged herself slowly in at the door, and dropped heavily down upon a bench, which creaked beneath her weight. "But it seems they're not ready for me yet," she added, with her unpleasing smile.

"Nay, you're still too big a sinner!" cried Lena, mockingly.

The uncle laughed approval; Urschi's face, however, wore anything but an amiable expression.

"You might be a doll out of a shop in that there dress," she remarked; "it's hard to make out which is the bride of you two."

Marie looked pale and tired. All night long she had been kneading

dough for pasties and spiced loaf, and making shortbread. By four o'clock everything had to be carried to the baker's. Lena had indeed given some help, but the task of direction rested mainly upon Marie herself. True, it had all been by her own wish. She was quite determined that the wedding should not take place from Urschi's house at Fellbach, and there Lena had sturdily backed her up. "In that piggery of theirs there would not be a mouthful fit to eat," said Lena, in her usual blunt fashion, not caring in the least how Pete might feel at such mention of the parental home. But Pete manifested no emotion; he thought it much more comfortable to remain in the house of which he was some day to be the master. And his parents, it need hardly be said, offered no kind of opposition. They were indeed rather taken aback when in due course the glebe-farmer handed them a minutely-reckoned claim for the expenses he had incurred both at home and at the "Star"; but Ursula's respect for her brother-in-law was only increased by this fresh instance of his uncompromising tight-fistedness.

"There's a man of business for

you!" said she, admiringly, to her sons; "that's just how you should do. I almost think it's my mother he takes after, though to be sure he never set eyes on her. She was a cute body, was my mother. 'Whatever is not more worthless than vermin you'd best pick up,' she used to say. She said it every day." The boys were well acquainted with this appetising domestic maxim; it was often quoted for their benefit. They yawned undisguisedly, but their well-disciplined eyes travelled over every corner of the festal parlour, for there it was that this conversation took place. The benches against the wall, and the chairs, were filled with guests; the younger ones stood about together in corners, lads and maidens, however, keeping apart. Most of them seemed ill at ease in their black holiday attire; only the elder men with their lighted pipes, and the old women with their hymn-books, wore that air of composure which betokens an unmoved acceptance of what the day brings forth. They applied themselves eagerly to the wine which the girls handed round;—empty glasses, hymn-books, kerchiefs, and here and there a posy lay upon the table and window-sills

amongst dishes of cake. From the young girls' corner would come an occasional titter, followed by the closing up of their ranks, which, however, reopened freely to admit Lena when she came tripping by. Marie's thoughts reverted continually to her mother's funeral—this was the first occasion since that day on which all the kinsfolk had been assembled at the farm. The giggling in the corner disturbed her as something that had not formed part of that other gathering. Now and again, too, she caught her father's voice ; he had been silent then—it stood out from the chatter of the guests and had a rasping sound such as his horn snuff-box made when being unscrewed. He was explaining that he had not wished for any music, flutes, fiddles, and the like. "It all mounts up directly, and at Stuttgardt they don't ever go in for that sort of thing." The glebe-farmer was a strong advocate of progress, when progress meant economy. The bridegroom's father had gone out "to have a look at the sow."

"You can see your son at the same time," cried Lena's sharp little tongue ; "he's still at the dung-heap."

Pete had indeed not yet put in an appearance ; he disliked nothing more than to be stared at by a crowd of relatives. So he contrived to be urgently engaged while awaiting the moment at which the company was to take its departure for the church, when without further ado he would don his wedding-suit. Lena, however, espied him, and let fly one stinging word on the top of the other. The early cordial relation between these two had come to an end just as had the close bond between the sisters. The house had hardly been more uncomfortable at the moment of the mother's death than of late.

The uncle came back into the stifling room and called through grey clouds of tobacco that it was time to be moving. At his heels followed Pete, red from much washing and wearing a look of annoyance—the result probably of Lena's recent thrusts. In spite of which she now drew near him to fasten his bridegroom's nosegay to his coat. A mere breath, it was plain, might yet easily suffice to rekindle the flames of war. Something impelled her to tug at his necktie and undo it with the remark, "How should a donkey know when it's

Sunday ? " Now this selfsame necktie had already that morning cost Pete an hour's anguish ; wherefore he struck Lena roughly upon the hand, and could in the end be mollified only by Marie's peace-making measures. Both, however, still continued in a state of smouldering irritation, and even on the way to church kept eyeing each other with scowls and wrathful glances, so that one of the bridesmaids felt prompted to give Lena a shove and to whisper, " Go it, Lena, at him then ! " But no laugh greeted this sally ; a strain of bitterness had soured the girl's whole nature.

Marie entered the church as in a dream. Only when her cherished minister's familiar voice struck upon her ear was she able to pull herself together and listen to the words he uttered. " Since God has willed it," was the one thought firmly rooted in her mind—the thought which had guided her to the altar. All along, as often as the image of that other man forced a way in, she had resisted it by repeating, " God's will." And at such times she had passed in review the entire situation, and considered it from every side. " It is my father's will ; but then he wants it because of Pete, seeing

that he has no son of his own, and that Pete can do the work of three, and does it too. It is my uncle's will ; but that is on account of my property. It is Urschi's will ; but then she wants to get her own sons a share in the inheritance. It is Pete's will ; he, however, wishes to have the farm. But it was my dead mother's will who loved me dearly, and so it is also God's will, and must therefore be mine."

And now she gathered up all her strength to listen for confirmation of this whole train of reasoning in the minister's words. She fixed her great, weary eyes questioningly upon his benign and gentle face, and he noticed the look, and soon it was as though he spoke for her alone. So lengthy a marriage discourse had seldom issued from his lips.

He spoke of love—of that Divine love which laid down life for the sake of fellow-men, whereby they might preserve an undying example of supreme devotion. Then he passed on to types of human affection, saying that before him stood a faithful daughter who well knew the meaning of a mother's love, which had watched and cared for her child even beyond the grave,

planning that her own guardianship, so soon to be withdrawn, should be replaced by another—by a husband's attachment and fidelity. The mother had herself sought out the man who should lead Marie to her new life.

Marie drew a deep breath. The whole thing fitted.

"It is true," continued the minister, earnestly, "that in all human concerns man proposes and God disposes. Here, however, both have met. God has blessed the wish of the parents, has inclined the hearts of the young kinsfolk to one another so that they have become attached, and in the strength of their love desire none other—he no other wife, she no other husband. For that let them thank God in their hearts."

Marie had turned pale. She still gazed upon the minister, but she no longer heard what he said. His last words had aroused something new and unsuspected within her. Was she in that state of which her spiritual guide had spoken? And if she were not, was it still God's will? The bridegroom was then addressed in the prescribed form, "Wherefore I ask you——" but she was awakened from her ruminations

only when at her side "Yea!" rang forth, uttered in Pete's familiar voice. The sound fell with a dead weight upon her heart. And now her turn had come; but she paid no heed to the words; her thoughts passed into vacancy; she ceased to watch the minister. Suddenly her eyes raised themselves and became fixed in an ecstasy upon a corner behind the altar, from which, as if out of the wall, a well-known face of blank despair was eagerly watching her. Whence had he so suddenly arisen? And wherefore that expression of terror, as though she were Rikele and were about to fall from the window before his very eyes? A shudder ran through her limbs. Was it God's will? Could it be God's will that she should marry Pete, and that the other should stand in the corner like an image of death? And was it indeed a sin that this should cause her grief? She sighed audibly, a corpse-like pallor overspread her features, she turned giddy and put out her hand to steady herself.

"Therefore confirm this before God and these Christian witnesses with an upright Yea," said the minister, and he looked at her searchingly, solemnly. Marie no

longer trembled, only her heart beat tumultuously within her at the sound of her own voice : she had said "Nay."

"What? What was that? *Nay?*" A disturbed murmur ran through the congregation ; the inn-keeper uncle shook the glebe-farmer roughly by the arm—the latter had just been deeply engaged in calculations about his excellent vintage—and shouted, "Marie says 'Nay'!" And "Marie says 'Nay!'" was caught up and passed along through the church, and upon every face wonder and consternation displayed themselves. Pete, dark-browed and heated, was muttering, "Sir, she refuses to have me!" Urschi clenched her fist in the air ; the glebe-farmer, angry veins swelling upon his low-set forehead, went flinging his arms about as though he were ready to commit an assault upon his daughter.

Then suddenly the voice of the minister thundered forth "Silence!" and quiet being straightway restored, he resumed in a low voice without a trace of anger, but also without solemnity—just, indeed, as a father might speak—"Lena, will you have him?"

"Yes!" cried a loud, sobbing voice, and in a twinkling Marie, who had

watched the whole proceedings with lamb-like passivity felt herself lifted off her feet and thrust back among the infuriated elders. In her deserted place at Pete's side stood Lena, so tremblingly eager, so flushed with happiness that one would have supposed she had lived for no other end save this.

An amused expression flickered over the minister's face. He now uttered another prayer while Marie was slipping into her sister's hand the ring which she was to have exchanged with Pete. This brought the ceremony to an end. The minister vanished into the sacristy ; amid loud discourse and laughter the wedding-guests filed out of the church.

The new-made pair had till now hardly looked at one another, but no sooner did they find themselves outside the sacred precincts than Pete, turning deliberately round, scanned Lena's face as though he had never yet set eyes upon her. Then of a sudden he exclaimed with a ringing shout, " Hurrah, Lena, we two ! " And he lifted her off her feet, and swung her round, nor could he be brought to set her down till, crimson for shame and with persistent entreaties, she had pulled him by the ears.

Now uprose wildest jubilation. "Hurrah!" shouted the young men; the girls responded with laughter and clapping of hands, running on tiptoe before the bride and her mate. The hopping and skipping went on as though a dance was to be started in the street itself. And where on earth did the music spring from? Anyhow, there it was, as if by magic, and the fiddles scraped, and the flutes rhapsodised, and by way of accompaniment to the joyous wedding-march, the lads at the "Star" set up a sort of birds' chorus from amidst the thick verdure of their garden.

Ill at ease in the rear of the merry-makers walked the elders, like a constricted dragon's tail, angry, nay furious, scandalised beyond all measure at such a breach of time-honoured usage and paternal authority. Urschi railed the loudest, not sparing the minister who had strengthened the rebel instead of duly rebuking her. Such conduct should be denounced in the presbytery, and then the minister would go bare of his May offerings, she maintained. Pete had now got the feather-head, Lena, hung round his neck and no estate with her, for the other was still the elder as much

as before. The glebe-farmer might just go and hire himself out as a common labourer to make up Lena's portion. Why did that blockhead of a Pete not guard himself against having Lena foisted upon him?

He guard himself! At that very moment his shout of exultation was heard above the torrent of Urschi's vituperations. Never in the whole course of his life had Pete felt so happy; and he, habitually so deliberate, so hard to rouse, now gave vent to such exuberance of spirits, such boy-like merriment as he had not for many a long year past indulged in. Lena's mock admonitions and gay laugh were heard from every corner. She could hardly get him to leave her; his arm was for ever round her; he wanted her beside him. What mattered to them the shrieking and execrations of the elders who without compunction thrust themselves in between them for the chance that the marriage might yet perhaps be cancelled. The happy pair only laughed them to scorn, infuriating Urschi the more that they succeeded in winning over the shock-headed louts to espouse their cause—those docile sons, one of whom his mother had

destined, if things had but gone straight, to become Lena's husband ; she had already in her own imagination seen him established along with Pete upon old Deininger's estate. Like conspirators fearful of the light, the three old people withdrew into a dark back room of the "Star" that looked out upon a dung-hill and hen-coops. Countless pots of beer that were carried in, and loud outbursts of wrath every now and then audible, testified to their place of retreat.

On the river side of the garden Marie was sitting in a sheltered summer-house. She still wore her black bridal dress, but her wreath she had taken off while standing before the altar, to place it upon her sister's head. She sat there pensively, her face bent down a little, her hands folded upon the rotten wooden table, and tried to think what would now be her lot in the home from which she had banished herself. Banishment it was ; that she well realised. Had her father not shouted at her even in the church that a beggar's pack befitted the likes of her, and that she should no longer be suffered to make a fool of him ?

Yet she was not sad. On the

contrary, she felt strengthened, full of courage, free. "And now," thought she, "I too understand what Rikele was feeling when she fell out of the window," and an unseen flush rose to her cheeks.

Then in came Lena and sat down beside her. Tears and laughter contended for victory upon her roguish face. She took Marie's hand, and leaned her cheek upon it, while a burning tear dropped from her eye.

"Oh, Marie, what is to be done? Now I'm married, and father goes on shouting that whoever has got Pete is to have the farm; that way you lose all, and it falls to me."

Marie cast a wistful glance in the direction of her father's house, the scene of her lifelong toil and care; but she said quietly—

"I thought as much, Lena, and it's right enough. I make no hindrance. God's will must be done." After a pause she continued, "Weren't you a bit over-hasty, though, in giving your word to Pete? I was half-scared when I heard you."

"Oh, I've cared for him this long time," cried Lena, effusively, "and I thank you from my heart for leaving

him to me." And she threw herself upon her sister's neck and kissed her vehemently. Such an embrace they had not known since their childish days. As if a sudden ray of light had struck her, Marie said—

"Then I'm no longer a step-mother to you?"

"I was very trying," whispered Lena, shamefacedly, and she squeezed her sister's hand. "Hullo! there comes Pete, he's looking for me. He's rather in a way, do you know, at your saying 'Nay' to him, and leaving him planted there like a waxen image. Good-bye for a minute; I'll fetch you something to eat and drink."

With a smile on her face Marie watched her spring towards Pete. She read the girl's feeling by the light of her own. "So it is," she thought; "it is God's will that people should love one another, and we must accept it. But where there is no love, God does not wish them to be joined together." And, overcome by reverent admiration of so perfect an ordering of things, she sent up fervent thanks to God for having allowed her to say no. Then she looked through the branches of her green retreat, and felt pleasure

in all she saw : in the flowing river above which a diaphanous mist was rising ; in the glassy weir and the pink-flushed evening sky ; in the heavily-laden vine-poles on the hill-side ; nay, even in the abundant meadow-saffron that flecked the greensward with its delicate purple touches. Though, to be sure, this plant is poisonous and hard to extirpate, and it had many a time awakened wrath both in her father and the schoolmaster. But the eye is oftentimes oblivious of material considerations, and was not even meadow-saffron the work of God ? Why, her very white lilies and hyacinths were unwelcome to her father, and maybe they too are poisonous for goats and cows. Surely everything cannot be grown for the one purpose of being devoured by cattle. "In the country that is how they, forsooth, regard it," thought Marie, "and if it were not for the Stuttgardt people's excursions out here, they would long since have pulled down the ruins in the garden at the 'Star.' But I myself heard a gentleman saying to the landlord, 'You should look well after that crumbling grey brickwork ; wine, and very good wine too, can be got in many

places, but these ruins here on the banks of the Neckar are the glory of Hofen, and cannot be multiplied.' And," thought Marie, "it's true there are none such at Fellbach, and it would be a thousand pities if they were pulled down. And then where would the Green-slipper go wandering that so many people have seen stepping in and out of the walls with its train and golden scarf and the pointed green shoes from which it gets its name?"

Then, her heart being lightened and her eyes weary, Marie laid her head upon her arms and fell asleep. She dreamed that the Green-slipper came by out of the wall and made a sign to her with a gold bunch of keys that it held in the right hand.

"You'll find a sweetheart," said the little elf; it was but half the size of a human being, the face was pointed and white and wrinkled, and the voice clear as a flute.

"Yes, Green-slipper, but where?" asked Marie, bewildered.

Then the elf took her hand, at which she started up and stared about. It had grown dusk; in her left hand was a little bunch of flowers fragrant to the sense. And near her a voice exclaimed—

"God be with you, Marie!"

Rather sleepily and still half-dreaming, she responded—

“God be with you! Who is there?”

“You already know me,” said the voice, with gentle assurance. It was a deep voice, not in the least like that in which Green-slipper had spoken. Marie recognised it, and hid her face in her nosegay, although it was too dark for her to be seen. She now knew quite well, however, who it was that stood before her at the table.

“I wanted to ask you, Marie, why you said ‘Nay’ in the church?”

“I didn’t love him, not more than——” she answered, falteringly.

A pause followed. Then, but tentatively and in low tones, came forth the words—

“Marie, my heart is heavy and my purse but light. Yet, may I bring flowers again to-morrow?”

“I’m going into service in the town,” whispered the girl.

Again a pause. Then he spoke, more diffidently than before—

“Marie, do you think you could care for me?”

“I almost think it.” And from her voice he could hear that she was laughing. She put out her hand across the table.

"Wilhelm is what they call you?"

"Aye, Wilhelm," and he grasped her hand tightly with both his own.

"Do you know, one finds out quickly when God has willed a thing," she said pensively, yet with joy at her heart; "one feels it somehow."

"Well, well! I thought it was all up with me when I heard you were to marry another man, and this morning——"

"Yes," said Marie, stopping him, "but your flowers——"

"And that sweet song, Marie. It runs for ever in my head, 'An angel speeds on silent way.' That's you, Marie."

"Nay, nay," said the girl, with eager deprecation, "it means Patience."

"I was for ever seeing the look on your face, and your tears over my misfortune—they were worth more than mere patience," said the young man.

"You must be going, Wilhelm, lest they see you," begged the girl. "Good-night, sleep well." And she tried to disengage her hand.

"Good-night, sleep well; may the Lord keep watch over you—that's what my mother always

says." His voice grew so tender as he uttered the words that Marie was impelled to say—

"You set store by your mother, I'm thinking."

"You're not far out," he rejoined, smiling. "My father died early—I was but three—and she brought me up alone. A trifle of money came to her from her own home, and she set up a business with it—gold-thread embroidering. It brings in a little, for it ain't every one as can do it. Well, I'll be off to see her, and get her to have a talk with your father."

"Yes, but he'll be in a way, and what'll your mother say, seeing as the farm is never to come to me?"

"She'll just tell herself that it's the girl I'm wanting, and not her money—then there's naught to be said. If your sister will pay you out, well and good; if not, it's all one to me. I'm no hand at farm work."

"If I could learn your mother's business?" suggested Marie.

"And why not? But there'll be no need. I've learnt my trade and studied, and the day before yesterday I won a prize at the industrial exhibition at Stuttgart."

"A prize? And for what?"

"For an oak dinner-table with carved dragon's feet. Stay, I know what I'll do now. I'll make another, but a smaller one this time," and he laughed cheerily to himself. Then he again squeezed her hand tightly. "Oh, my girl, do you know the song that begins—

'Sun-flower, fairest, banish doubt,
My heart shall wall thee round about'?

"That's just how I feel, Marie."

* * * *

Lena was not a little astonished to hear subdued voices among the bushes, for she still believed her sister to be alone. She was, therefore, the more startled when, entering laden with food and drink, she ran against a man, who straightway struck a match and held it up before his face. The handsome young carpenter himself! Quickly Lena set down her tray and looked with anxious scrutiny from one to the other.

"Good gracious, Marie, you don't even know who he is!" she exclaimed, in astonishment.

Marie blushed and laughed, "I do, though."

"But, bless me, you don't know his name."

"You told it me yourself, Lena."

"Come, be sensible ; shake hands with your brother-in-law, and I'm much beholden to you for having wedded Pete," said the carpenter, without ceremony.

Lena was on the edge of breaking out, as was her way when things passed her understanding.

"Trickster !" she muttered ; but suddenly she broke into loud laughter. "What will father say now ? I can see the eyes he'll make."

* * * *

And that indeed was what happened when there presented herself before him on the following day a little old woman with a prematurely withered but intelligent face and a pair of large though somewhat tired eyes. She wore decent-looking, town-made clothes, a grey dress, grey shawl, grey woollen gloves, and a straw bonnet trimmed with a ribbon of the same colour. Her voice was as soft-toned as her garments ; but she knew quite well how to direct the conversation to the subject of her son, whom the farmer must certainly have heard of, seeing that he had been helping for a time at Dietz's workshop.

"Sorry—know nothing of him," said the farmer, abruptly.

This did not greatly disconcert his visitor, who quietly proceeded to enlarge upon her son's merits and skill, and to tell how he had lately won a prize at the industrial exhibition.

"Know nothing of all that," coughed the glebe-farmer.

But the woman now came to the point with calm precision. This excellent son of hers desired to ask for the hand of the glebe-farmer's daughter Marie.

"Sorry, but she ain't got no money." And Deininger was about to turn his back upon her.

At this the woman bridled up. Was it money she had been asking for, or the girl? Sure enough it was a convenience to a workman if his wife did not come to him quite unfurnished. But to be set upon these things as peasants were—that was not in their ways.

"Sorry, ma'am, but them as goes in for abusing peasants had best not seek to get into a peasant's house!" was the furious retort.

She chose not to hear this speech, but with great animation proceeded to inform him how for years she had maintained herself and her son with her gold-thread work. The flags of military men's and retired officers'

clubs and of the guilds all round about, not to speak of many altar cloths, had been the work of her hands; therefore she felt no anxiety as to her future, even though her son's wife should come with a purse not over full.

"Empty," interrupted the farmer.

She continued, "And a girl's heart that keeps faith under temptation is not to be held cheap. My son's account of it all drew the tears from me."

Here Deininger broke out, "Then it must have been a plot, that refusing at the altar. But I can play at that game, too. My daughter is the child of peasants, and not one for a carpenter. Ay, if he'd had money, but he ain't got none; he has nothing at his back. With money anything's to be had, but without——"

At this moment in came Marie, who with a palpitating heart had followed the discussion unseen. She now exclaimed, in a voice half of exhortation half of entreaty—

"Father, are you wanting to sell Christ over again?"

Whether she rightly knew what she was saying, whether her father understood her, remains matter for conjecture. Anyhow, these words

failed not of the desired effect ; the farmer was reduced to silence. Then Marie led Wilhelm's mother, who had sunk exhausted upon the bench, into the garden, that she might soothe and revive her. They had taken to one another from the very first.

An hour glided happily by. Meanwhile Pete and Lena had been doing their part in the work of intercession, and by the time Marie and Wilhelm's mother returned the old man was ready to declare that his daughter's conduct in the church had been a scandal through the whole village, and that he was only too glad to be rid of her.

That was his form of consent ; and four weeks later Marie again stood at the altar, but this time in the high-lying little Gothic church at Berg, from which the fertile green valley of the Neckar lies to view.

Rumour said that the presbytery had indeed admonished the minister regarding his summary proceedings ; their action did not appear, however, to have greatly troubled him. His face beamed delightedly each time his young couple came across him. When first they met, he beckoned

Lena to him and said, with a twinkle—

“Neatly done, wasn't it?”

Lena was unequal to more than a shy nod of assent, upon which he whispered—

“I wanted to ask you—who was it that was kissing Pete behind the hedge on the morning of the wedding?”

“Why, sir, he's my own cousin,” faltered Lena, turning crimson.

“Well, well; but it's best as it is,” said the minister, smiling.

In the little Gothic church at Berg Marie uttered only the customary “Yea,” but, although this momentous word had converted her into a happy wife, its very familiarity made it of no great account in the memory of her co-villagers. Her “Nay,” on the other hand, has become proverbial; and if any one now says or does the exact opposite of what had been expected of him, friends still look at one another and exclaim, “Marie says ‘Nay!’”





OUR JENNY.



OUR JENNY.

TIS from Holstein, after all, that the best are got. Bohemian carp have a quality of their own, but there are so many of the mirror kind among them, and you get hardly anything to suck off the scales—little enough even off the so-called leather carp, the thick-skinned sort. Then, again, what is sent from Bohemia takes long in coming ; and sometimes the water in the barrels will be tepid, which spoils the flavour of the fish, or it will freeze and kill a good few. The bit of bread steeped in spirits that is stuck into their mouths does not always suffice to ensure their living—not by any means always. No, it's much safer to have to do with Holstein carp. Johann Christian Wobbe dealt in these exclusively—got them from Dicksee, as every customer of his

had had frequent opportunities of learning.

What a blessing it is when one can trust the people with whom one has business dealings ! To Johann Christian Wobbe you might blindly pin your faith. Look at him in his broad white apron and poke-cap, with his ruddy cheeks and blue eyes. Trustworthiness itself seems to confront you as he stands there in his rambling cellar-shop among his ten square red-japanned tanks, into which fresh water trickles unceasingly from above, and in like measure dribbles out below. Something rotund and well-to-do not only belongs to his face, but informs his very movements, as when he draws a big floundering carp out of its tank and lays it with an air of protecting tenderness upon the scales. "And, if you wish him killed at once, ma'am, I'll knock him on the head, but I'll lay a cloth on top, so as you don't need to see, for I've heard some say as how they no longer fancy eating 'em after they've seen 'em hit. Do I feel that way? Nay, ma'am, not I. It's just a matter of habit, and, after all, ma'am, come to think of it—ain't they there to be eaten? Carp is sent into the world for us

to enjoy 'em, as you may say, at New Year or other times. There, ma'am—nay, he'll not come to life again, and you needn't fear being messed ; the wrappings is thick. Shall you be needing any horse-radish, ma'am? Already got it? I'd have served you with it just as handy, and only one settling. Good-day to you, ma'am. A Happy New Year, and shall be pleased to see you here again soon."

The lady pulled out her purse and paid. "But your prices are a trifle high, my good Herr Wobbe," she said, raising her finger at him ; "quite up to last year's. Across the way there at Bornemann's they are asking a penny a pound less."

"Ma'am, you know what I told you! Them's not Holstein carp. They's just odd lots, bought in a lump, as you might say. Think of carp got wholesale! Now I put it to you!" Wobbe's whole being expressed repugnance and contempt. "When one bears in mind that every single fish needs to be sorted out by itself," he added, pregnantly.

His customer shrugged her shoulders. "I was only thinking your business might otherwise be a bit brisker. Over at Bornemann's

the people are actually standing out in the street, and his store on the Alster looked like an ant-hill."

"Ay, business ain't none too easy nowadays," sighed the fishmonger, and he glanced anxiously towards the doorway, where a couple of servant-girls happened to stand gossiping; "but, when all's said and done, Bornemann don't keep the right article." With a shake of his round head he added, in a low tone, "My shed is next his on the Alster; it's just half-dead wares he deals in! They'd not suit my stomach, I know that."

Suddenly he saw the servant-girls preparing to go. He sprang after them, and seized one by the arm. "Hist! young woman! Have you got what you want? No? What are you off for, then? Can't you wait a minute?" he called, eagerly.

"We was just hearing tell that you charge ninepence, and so we mean to try Bornemann yonder," said one of the girls, pertly. "I'd as soon save a penny a pound. Come on, Lizzie."

A pale and sickly-looking woman rose up against the counter. She was swathed in the folds of a close-knit lilac crossover; a woollen wrap encompassed her head. It was Frau

Wobbe herself. She had been in the small basement-room at the back of the shop, her wonted retreat during sale hours.

"Nothing doing again," she said, in a disheartened tone, surveying the empty shop; "I can't make it out."

"I can," retorted her husband; "and I only wish as how I could put a stopper on him."

"For why, Crish?"

"So as he shouldn't grab hold of everything for hisself!" he exclaimed, fiercely.

"How could you hinder him?" urged the woman; "things is as they is."

"But it shan't go on!" shouted the fishmonger, flushing crimson. No one would have believed that his jolly, double-chinned, stumpy-nosed face could wear so threatening an aspect. He struck his fist upon the marble top of the counter. "It ain't nothing short of murder, it ain't!"

"That child's still out," said the woman, by way of diversion, and thrust her hands under her apron. "I hope to goodness she won't get herself a cold."

"The girl favours me; she's hearty," declared Webbe. "But you won't do amiss to call her in."

His wife went to the shop-door, threw open a wing of it and called, "Jenny! Jenny!" holding her head-wrap over her mouth the while, for there was a strong draught, and clouds of damp fog came drifting from outside.

In moody silence, his hands clasped behind his back, Wobbe had taken his stand against one of the tanks. "It's past all endurance!" he murmured to himself.

"We'd ought to have had more stock in the shop this evening. You'd best go out, Crish."

"We'll be having the lot upon our hands; see if we don't."

The woman seated herself upon a chair; it was one that stood there habitually for the use of customers.

"I say, Crish," she began, hesitatingly, "how 'ud it do if you was to bring down prices a bit?"

Wobbe looked angrily at her. "Bring down prices? Go in for their swindling ways? What are you thinking of?"

"But Bornemann!" she pleaded.

"What he can do, I can't do," he cried; "the thing that he does by way of speculation would sink me; surely that's plain enough! They say as how he laid in twenty dozen yesterday. Who's to keep going at

that rate? I may work myself to the bone, and all to no good." He clenched his fist. "Wouldn't I like to do for him, the d——d vampire!"

His wife looked up with a scared expression. "But, after all, the man's done you no wrong."

"Ain't it enough," he shouted, fiercely, "that he's took the bread out of my mouth, that my place is going to the dogs, that I, with my good name and a business that already stood high in my father's day, must now sit and keep watch for customers, as if I was some whipper-snapper making his first start? Ain't it enough that this fellow comes here and plants himself under my very nose, with his plate-glass windows, and marble slabs, and big fountains, and all the rest of it, and then goes and under-sells me? Oh, I'd give something to——"

He stopped short; another customer had at length arrived. But his feelings were not to be materially relieved by one insignificant purchase.

Left alone again he unfastened his white apron and laid aside his cap. "Well, I'm off," he said. "What little there may be to look

after while I'm gone, you'll manage to see to by yourself."

"You might try to make out what the child is doing," begged his wife. "Strikes me she's at the ice again."

"She's a brick, that girl," answered Wobbe, and a sunny smile swept over his gloomy face: "one of the right sort. Pity she wasn't a boy."

"If only she would come home," sighed the mother: "she's too wild and venturesome by half. A thirteen-year-old girl, and always her skates on or tearing about the streets!"

"Let her have her fling," said the man, as he brushed his coat. "When she's a bit older there'll be enough of sitting still and being worried. These are her best years."

The woman shook her head, but allowed the subject to drop. She handed a big white muffler and a pair of gloves to her husband who stood ready to start.

"What a day to be on the Alster!—don't you go and get cold, Crish, and—and I was wanting to say, you'd better have put on your top-boots: it'll be wet down there."

He came back and followed her advice.

Shivering, the woman sat on in the half subterranean cellar with its smell of fish and water and monotonous dripping sound. Through the blurred window-panes, in front of which, though it was scarcely half-past two, a row of gaslights already burned, she watched the passing to and fro of the crowd. It was, in truth, little enough that she could see behind the dull glass veil ; only legs striding along and getting splashed, flapping coat-tails, and here and there a face, red-nosed and crimson-eared, that bent inquisitively down to gaze into the cellar. Over the way, the door of Bornemann's smart corner shop opened and closed incessantly. And then came a barrel-organ, and played "Now thank we all the Lord" to the running accompaniment of Bornemann's bell. At length, by a half-unconscious impulse, the woman seated herself where she could no longer see across.

Meanwhile Wobbe had trudged through the town along the old and new Jungfernstieg. At the corner, between Lombards bridge and the esplanade, lay his own storing-house on the Inner Alster. It had been thawing since yesterday, the ice was half submerged in water, so

that the tents and booths appeared to float unstayed upon its blackened surface ; the wind tugged at the sopping flags, and the lamps that had already here and there been lighted gleamed from below like twinkling red stars.

A great flock of crows circled, cawing, round the fish-stores. The approach of human intruders would every now and again send them flying up in a thick black cloud against the sky, to whose leaden tint a few yellow stripes in the western horizon alone lent relief. A detachment of the dusky brood perched watchfully on the huge weighing scales of Bornemann's store, craning their necks after dead fish or offal. Pausing a moment in his walk, Wobbe, too, surveyed the depôt of his rival. The expression of his blue eye had something of the crow about it as he shook his thickly-gloved fist in the direction of Bornemann's main building and counting-house. But hurriedly he drew in his hand. A man in water-boots and an oilskin jacket came stepping from the door.

Wobbe opened his own shed, struck a light and inspected the tins of fish that had been lowered into the broken ice. By the aid

of his lamp he could clearly distinguish the dusky yellow swarm, from which a snapping mouth would ever and anon protrude itself. Against a partition wall stood a big catcher, with an iron handle. He laid hold of it and began to fish. All round were placed large kegs filled with water, into which he emptied his net. When he had taken a sufficient supply, he shut up the trap-door, and went to call the assistant who was to cart the kegs away into the town. He helped to load the truck. Then, "You go forward, Klas," he said, "I've left my gloves in there."

At Bornemann's storing-house, adjoining his, the door was ajar.

"By Jove, there's another!" some one shouted, and a piece of wood came bang against the wall. Wobbe found himself unconsciously listening to the loud talk inside.

"Have you caught it? Wasn't that a squeak I heard?" asked a fresh voice, which then broke off suddenly with, "Confound it, this very minute it ran against my legs!"

A din of voices ensued, and much laughter. "Keep the door shut, just one instant!" cried the first speaker.

"Devil take it ! I can't abide the brutes !" exclaimed another. "Let me out, Lührs !"

Wobbe had barely time to spring aside, for the door was burst open by two young clerks, who scudded off like a brace of greyhounds.

"There he goes !" shouted Lührs, vehemently waving his big catcher. "Get out of the road a bit, Lüders ; wait—now I've got him !"

Lüders, already hatted and gloved, gave a shudder of disgust and hurried off landwards. "Day to you !" he nodded back, hastily.

"Bless us and save us, if there ain't another ! We've stirred up a whole nest. Here's a pretty go with all this vermin," and Lührs went charging round as though he were resisting a legion of unseen demons.

"What's up ?" cried some one from a neighbouring storing-house. Then in a twinkling the situation became clear.

"Hullo, lads, here they are !" shrieked Lührs.

He slipped out and plunged full length into the shallow water. All laughed and crowded together. The fishermen, the salesmen, the very book-keepers, followed excitedly like a horde of wild boys in the track

of the luckless water-rats. When, after a chase of half an hour, Lührs, wet through and breathless, set out to run back, he all but collided with some one who was moving in the opposite direction. He recognised the broad-set, easy-going man, and exclaimed—

“Evening, Wobbe. Pity you weren’t there to help. I’ve stuck at least ten of ’em; don’t know when we’ve had such a lark!”

“Good - night,” said Wobbe, curtly, and passed on.

Frau Wobbe had had little to do. There’s no getting over the fact that people such as Wobbe cannot make head against a neighbour of Bornemann’s magnitude. She sat in the shop, knitting away with pale, cold-stiffened fingers at a woollen vest for her husband—it was a Christmas present that had not been ready quite in time. Every other minute she would lay aside her needles, breathe into her hands, rub them together, and listen for the sound of Crish or Jenny. Jenny had looked in shortly after her father’s departure.

“Gracious me, child! are you there at last?” Frau Wobbe had called with a lightened heart, and wanting to feel the girl’s stockings,

to see if they were not damp. But there was a hoyden for you! She just struggled and laughed, and cried out—

“As dry as a bone, mother! Where’s dad? At the storing-house? Well, then, give me my new hair-ribbon, the other’s got lost again, and I’ll just run and meet him a bit of the way.”

And without heeding her mother’s plaintive remonstrances, the harum-scarum creature, who was as like her father as a young potato is like an old one, re-fastened her thick fair plait, buttered herself a slice of bread, and was off. An ugly, muggy night for her to be out, but seemingly not such as her rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed bloom could by any chance be the worse of.

And so now both of them were away, and Trina, who just wanted “to send off a New Year’s card,” had been absent a whole hour upon that errand, though the pillar-box was actually at the very next corner, and the apple-cakes had still to be fetched. Then suddenly—as if witchcraft were at the bottom of it—one customer after another began to arrive. And they were all in a desperate hurry, and kept on asking, “Are you single-handed

to-day?" And upon hearing that she was, they all pulled long faces, and thought it "queer, to say the least," on New Year's Eve, when carp were in such demand. Frau Wobbe grew so hot that she had to throw off her head-shawl; she even put away her crossover in order to move and turn more freely. She gathered up her whole strength, trying to kill each fish with a single stroke. Once, however, she aimed crooked and bruised her left thumb, and a big carp bit her hand, so that the blood ran out. Ah, but it's no use minding; only grin and bear it! That's what a business woman has got to do. Yet, amidst her breathless exertions, she could not refrain from casting uneasy glances towards the door, and—good heavens! to crown her anguish—people are now coming in shoals, and hardly any carp remain! If Crish doesn't speedily get back with fresh supplies, they may as well put up the shutters. Will she ever forget this New Year's Eve?

Hark! A weight is lifted from her heart. "Crish, is it you?" Yes, he's there, and Klas is outside with six whole kegs of carp. Thank God! She signs to him with a look; he has already girt his apron,

and springs to and fro in his big water-boots, and quiets those who have had to wait, and empties the kegs, and slaughters and weighs and wraps—a different style of doing work from that of his frail companion ! But she is puzzled, as far as the turmoil gives her time to be, that he seems to take so little pleasure in this roaring trade. What's gone wrong with him now ? she wonders, and suddenly she feels a choking sensation in her throat, and she calls across to him, "Didn't you bring the child with you ?" But he looks vacantly about and seems not to have heard. "No," she says to herself, "it's not the child, it's something else that's on his mind." Yet, where can the girl be stopping ? "Jenny wanted to go and meet you at the storing-house." He chanced to be standing near her as she spoke, but apparently had not noticed her proximity, for he gave a start, exclaiming, "At the storing-house ? What are you talking about ?"

Has her husband been drinking ? Why, the little one is for ever at his heels. "Well, we're sure to have her back soon, Crish," she says, soothingly, for now she sees that his eyes keep ever turning to

the door. A fresh keg having to be brought in, he avails himself of the moment's breathing time to go into the open air.

"Good evening, Wobbe," and a neighbour's wife pushes up close to him. "Do keep an eye on that girl of yours. I didn't want to say aught in there because of your wife, but some one has again been drowned."

"Drowned? Who? When?" Wobbe presses his wet hand against his head.

"On the Alster—a little girl," whispers the woman. "I was just hearing that your lassie is out still."

"Shall you be much longer, Herr Wobbe?" cries a servant-maid, who has followed him into the street, and now plucks him by the sleeve. "My missus'll be in a rare state if I don't get back, and my hands is that cold."

On his other side Trina is holding a big, flapping fish in front of his nose: "Look, sir, the tailor says as how this ain't right carp—it's just a quillback. What's got to be done about it?"

Big drops of perspiration are on Wobbe's brow, as he returns into the shop. His sickly wife's darkly-ringed eyes seem to pierce through the mask of his face. "Jenny?"

She'll be stopping at Schwartau's," he remarks at random.

The woman nods assent. "Likely enough. The tree was to be took to pieces to-day."

And customers still keep crowding in, and the man's tongue wags ever more volubly. "Yes, my good sir, I tell you they're as fresh as fresh can be. Just you look—full of life. Will you have large or small, ma'am? Large? You're right there, ma'am; else there's apt to be too much tail. And you, Miss? Prefer three small 'uns? You know what's what; the small 'uns is best to eat. Three pound, old friend? Will that do ye? There's three and not a hair's weight over. Yes, I'm that used to it, you know; my two hands serve me well-nigh like scales. There now! Three prime middle cuts out of each. Put a drop of vinegar over 'em, and just you see what a colour they'll turn! Things is brisk; ay, that's what we like, real business, just as it should be; 'tain't always as lively, though." He breaks off, and his hands are idle for a moment—a little girl has just entered the doorway. He fancies his wife has called him, drops the knife, goes up to her and whispers hoarsely, "What did you

say?" The woman stares at him without answering. Suddenly she feels as if things were too much for her—the pushing and clatter, and the gaslight, and even her husband with his rolled-up sleeves and besmeared hands, standing there and talking as if in a fever. She must run across to Schwartau's—away from the crowded shop where she is yet so greatly needed. In going she says, "I'll be back directly," but he hears nothing, and works like an automaton.

Outside on the steps the thought of her husband moves her to tears. He has never been like this before. A narrow red streak of light from a street lamp falls across the room where her big cupboard stands; and suddenly she rushes back and shrieks aloud. Is that the child lying there in her bed—there before her very eyes, but white and motionless as a corpse? "Child, is that you?" Trembling she draws near the bed. No answer greets her, and with shaky fingers she tries to touch the face. Then a long breath of relief—nothing is there save Jenny's little rolled-up night-dress! How, indeed, should the child have crept up to her room so noiselessly? But now she must

sit down, for she is shaking from head to foot. "God grant no trouble's a-brewing!" she murmurs, and starts at hearing the clock strike half-past eight. She tears bonnet and shawl out of the cupboard. Drat it! that's her summer bonnet! No matter. If the child is only safe at Schwar-tau's!

A brisk business even yet, and the man is alone now, for Trina's help means next to nothing. It's enough to drive any one crazy. He no longer utters a superfluous word; around is a humming and buzzing of voices. "Ay, as I tell you, they all swam away, and a tribe of men at work to catch 'em with nets and poles and tubs. You never saw such a state of things, and no chance of gettin' 'em from under the ice. Some will have it as they was just half dead 'uns that can't go far: still it's bound to be a heavy loss for Bornemann. Herr Wobbe, ain't you feelin' well? Shall I get you a drop o' brandy? And as I was goin' to say, they's tellin' of a little girl as has been drowned—her as was first to let 'em know what had happened."

At this point came a universal

shout : " Good Heavens ! Herr Wobbe ! "

The fishmonger has pulled the box of gold fish down upon his body from the counter, having tried as he fell to steady himself against it. Two neighbours have rushed to the rescue, and now with staring eyes he sits upon the slicing-board, and beside him stands Trina wiping his face with her apron. Water keeps dripping from it, and even blood, for the splinters of glass have cut his cheeks. She screams aloud, and again and again exclaims, " Our Jenny's still out. God grant it's not her they tell of ! "

In front of the door is heard the sound of wheels ; the door is pushed slowly open ; some one gravely inquires, " Does Wobbe, the fishmonger, live here ? "

" They're bringing her," people murmur, and press close together in order to make room.

A man carries something in—something wrapped up in a thick dark shawl. Wringing his hands, Wobbe springs from his seat, " My lass ! "

Then the shawl opens a little way, and a small white bit of nose becomes visible, and a feeble voice croons forth, " Only a tumble in the water, dad ; don't be angry."

Feeble as the voice was, Frau Wobbe must have heard it from the street, for she is there, thrusting off bonnet and shawl behind her, groaning and laughing: "Child, child, what a fright you've given me!" Wobbe, however, keeps timidly at a distance, as if he might yet be dreaming, as if he dared not draw near his rescued darling.

"Don't be angry, dad," says the voice once more; "I couldn't bear to see Bornemann's carps all swimming off, and I just slid out a tiny way on the ice."

The people stand wiping their eyes. They never thought to see a man weep like that, least of all a jog-trot, ruddy-faced fellow of Wobbe's sort. He sobs like a little child, keeps stretching impotent arms towards his daughter, and gets no further.

His wife is not half as much upset. She only shouts "Trina!" and "Kettle on!" and "Quick, warm bottles!" and doesn't even stop to look at the child. Things affect different people so differently.

"How in the world did it come about?" some one asks Lührs, for he it was who brought the little maiden home. Wobbe turns

away; his eyes are rooted to the floor. The other shrugs his shoulders. "I expect those old fish boxes are just as rotten as they can be. Likely the rats had gnawed through everything. The lassie was first to notice it."

Jenny pokes her head out of the shawl. "I'd just run down to look for dad, and I sees our shed closed, but Bornemann's next it was open, and the big tank as well, and I looks in and sees that the carps is all slipping out underneath and going one way like, and that they keeps getting fewer and fewer. And I calls for help and takes a catcher from the wall. And Lührs might have set me down, only I've got his wife's dress on, and it's just yards too long for me."

"And the carp have all escaped?" somebody asks.

Lührs shakes his head musingly. "I fancy we shall get the most of 'em again when the ice gives way. Accidents will happen, however, and, thank goodness, our business can stand one such little misfortune."

And now the fishmonger has taken his child in his arms, and carries her into her well-warmed bed. But he still trembles as he sits beside her,

holding her hands. Self-accusation may be read in his face, and a fixed resolve. He will not forget this New Year's Eve.



THE OLD BOOK-KEEPER.



THE OLD BOOK-KEEPER.

HE served as clock for half the town—a clock, too, that was never in need of repair. People even insisted that years had made him only a still more rigid timekeeper, which can hardly be said of clocks in general.

Every morning, precisely ten minutes before half-past eight, the noticeable figure with its stooping back, dreamy face, and green umbrella tucked under the arm, might be seen wending its way along the Neustrasse. A household signal that : “Off with you now to school ; old Schröder has gone by.” At half-past eight the cry was caught up at the Heuberg. And at the Ness, five minutes before the three-quarters, the terrified children might be heard lamenting : “Old Schröder’s

there already ; we've loitered too long to-day ! ” On the very stroke of a quarter to nine he entered the venerable house in the Reichenstrasse, and made straight for the office, which he invariably reached before anybody else. That seemed to him, as eldest book-keeper of the firm, a sacred duty. The key of the counting-house lay under his pillow at night. Hat and umbrella once disposed of, he climbed the high stool, unlocked his desk, and lost himself in the long columns of figures which composed his life. The counting-house door might open a dozen times to admit one after another of the clerks ; he never stirred. These young fellows moved about in the great business house with a careless assurance that was both strange and distasteful to him. With them a ten years' length of service was something quite exceptional ; it seemed hardly worth while, therefore, to trouble about getting to know their names or even faces—mere birds of passage as they were ; light-hearted fledglings for the most part, who thought it right to chatter glibly in the principal's absence, even to laugh aloud and race from seat to seat. There had been a time when their

ways disturbed the book-keeper, but now he had grown used to them, and his face preserved the same unchangeably absent-minded expression for everything unconnected with his work. Even his principal, the "young one," as for the last twenty years he had been styled, fell far below the ideal chief of Schröder's inner consciousness. There was a joviality, an unrestraint in his deportment that the staid old man could but ill stomach. Clutching at the pen behind his ear, he would spring at a bound upon the book-keeper's desk, replace the pen, drag it forth anew, and perhaps do this twice or thrice without so much as writing a single word, all the while rubbing his hands in feverish impatience, and scarcely allowing time for his own questions to get answered. When this sort of thing happened Schröder would grow tremulous, turn aside his piteous face, and give a low cough under cover of his pocket-handkerchief, with which he then fell to wiping his forehead until the disturbing element had disappeared.

He seldom opened his lips in the counting-house ; but in his small bachelor's room at home, he would, to the edification of his landlady,

relieve his dissatisfaction by audible self-communings. "Oh, boy, boy, boy!" he might be heard sighing, "if only you had been my son! There's no stability in you, no sense of fitness. But how indeed should there have been? An orphan! Ah, if she had only taken me!" Then upon these exclamations followed interminable ablutions accompanied by groans and such a splashing of water as left the room quite wet. After which ceremonies our friend, recovering his equanimity, would sally forth more ruddy-cheeked than old age is wont to show itself, smooth and unfurrowed, in spite of the burden of his seventy-two years, and tightly enclosed in his stiff, snowy-white shirt-collar.

He was the modestest of living beings, and the line of demarcation between rich and poor seemed to him as fundamental a fact of nature as the difference between fat and lean, short and tall. Still, in years gone by, he had once dreamed a dream, and this romantic dream it was that still haunted him in his self-communings, and would in truth never quite vanish from his somewhat vacant and inactive mind.

Soon after his entrance upon

service in the great Reichenstrasse import business, it might be about five years later—he was then twenty-seven—the head of the firm suddenly died, leaving a young widow of stately beauty, and a handful of little children. A brother of the widow stepped into the vacant office chair. As regarded the heart's void, old Schröder, who at that time was of course young Schröder, could bethink him of no better means to fill it than was afforded by his own then erect and ever-loyal person. And with the whole ardour of his being did he yearn that his gracious mistress might share this view. Needless to say, he did nothing that could give her an inkling of what was fermenting in his brain. Oh no, his audacity would never have gone that length! On the contrary, he kept his wishes a secret from the entire world. And for her who formed the goal of his desire he, on principle, allowed himself to languish only at the most respectful distance.

Soon after her husband's death he had had occasion, by virtue of his office, to discuss a multiplicity of details with her, all of course of a strictly business nature. These conversations in her own richly-

furnished private apartment, where, however kindly she might bid him do so, courage almost failed him to sit down, had proved the initial stage of a life's devotion. For, not to speak of her incomparable graces of person, she displayed such common sense, so practical a mind, and showed so thorough a mastery of assets and liabilities, that he recognised in her the very embodiment of the ideal merchant's wife.

Alas that these opportunities of personal contact had not been more frequent !

Every evening he would walk past her lighted window, behind which she was reading, or maybe dressing, for she drove most nights to the theatre. If at length, under cover of a sheltering portal, he had managed to catch a glimpse of her in her evening dress stepping forth from the illumined setting of her doorway, he too, though by another road, must needs hurry into the theatre, where often enough he spent his last sixpence that he might purchase a place, far, very far away from hers, in truth, but yet so situated as to admit of his seeing her face and watching the play of her changeful features. And neither in Schiller nor in Shake-

speare lay the witchcraft that could lure his gaze from her and fix it on the stage. This abiding pre-occupation made him set most store by the nights on which operas were being given, as there was then no distraction of spoken words, but only tender or passionate melody to accompany the thoughts excited in him as he gazed.

With a thrill of joy did he one day read in his newspaper that "a flute equal to new" was being offered for sale. This sensitive instrument had ever been dear to him above all others. He purchased the flute, and piped with superhuman persistence, though, as his master pointed out, he was scant of breath. His performance disturbed even himself, because, owing to unskilful stopping, he kept getting out of tune. He had practised that moving air, "Gentle moon so calmly sailing," and had one night been puffing away at it some three hours or so when—lo and behold! his landlady's head was poked in at the door. "It's just gone twelve o'clock," she exclaimed severely. "If you can't have done with that tootling, I shall need to give you notice. It don't come to nothing either; it's only wasting breath."

Deeply mortified, he let drop the flute ; he had already drawn in his cheeks for very fright. "Wasting breath?" was that what it came to? And he who had dreamed of capturing a heart !

Nor did he again unlock the case in which his coy auxiliary now lay enshrined. He must seek some other outlet for his soul's message. Finally he decided to try the kettle-drum, a waggish fellow at the theatre having told him that that was out of sight the easiest instrument to learn. But he received quite a shock upon hearing its martial clang in the narrow confines of his room ; and since he could not but fear that his efforts would be accounted a fresh disturbance of midnight slumbers, and as such resented, he betook himself to the site of the solitary—at that time deserted—observatory, and there, seated upon a sand-hill, beat out his heart's longing to the smiling moonlight, till the terrified sand-martins fluttered from their nest-hollows and darted questioningly round his head. Those were hours of unforgettable enchantment.

But this style of love-making was even then considerably out of date, and it led to nothing. The servants

of his sovereign lady did, it is true, record their observations, and whispered to each other, giggling and nudging, how the book-keeper "made regular sheep's-eyes if Madam so much as showed herself at the window."

These round, pale blue eyes of his gave his face a curiously child-like appearance, and there was something, too, about his brow that told of a restricted range of thought. Such limitations, however, injured no one, and certainly never troubled the officiating head of the firm, who knew that a more trustworthy and willing servant than Schröder did not draw breath. The poor fellow remained happy in his hope, especially as the widow kept all suitors at a distance, and lived only for her children—at present, as he trusted.

Year after year went by. The kettle-drum was laid beside the flute, and Schröder's habit of self-communion grew ever more confirmed. The youngest boy of his adored mistress, an infant in arms at the time of his father's death, in due course reached the stage of a tight little blue velvet coat, and wore a smartly-feathered hat upon his wayward locks; but she had

still not raised her hand to give the long-expected signal of love for which he waited so persistently. Later on, the feeble elder son fell gravely ill, and the mother took anxious flight to the far south with her dying treasure. The two daughters were placed at a boarding school; the younger boy accompanied his mother and brother to Madeira.

When after a year she returned, she was in mourning, and the little one alone walked at her side. Less than ever did the soft-hearted book-keeper now dare to intrude upon her, even in thought. But he became an ardent church-goer, for in these days she was oftener to be seen at church than at the theatre. Borne aloft upon the strains of the organ, his adoration grew ever more ethereal. It was no deity that he adored; his true object of worship was the beautiful woman who now seemed to him so trebly beautiful beneath her crown of pain, and who made the church in very truth a hallowed place. He envied the organist his mastery over that sea of sound. If only it had been vouchsafed to him to play the organ! But he was assured that without previous training this was an im-

possibility, and so he loved on in silence.

In one solitary respect only did he at times cherish rebellion within his breast—the matter, namely, of her son's up-bringing. The wilful boy had grown into an impetuous, quick-tempered youth. Judged by his unconventional dress, dark hair, and off-hand manners, no one could have assumed him to be a merchant. She had spoilt him, beyond a doubt. He, Schröder, ought to have been his father. Even when, later on, the youth gave evidence of an excellent head for business, and became the old book-keeper's young chief, the latter could still not overcome his regret that the "orphan boy" had been denied his due, a son's just right—unstinted birching.

At this point, however, he had almost ceased to keep count of the years, save when making up his balance sheet. Not that he felt weary of life or faint of heart ; he still regarded "the thing" as possible, and throughout preserved the unswerving, expectant attitude that keeps old age at bay, and prevents a man from becoming neglectful either of his mind or person. True, the machine was beginning to grind more slowly than of yore ; the pen

glided with increasing deliberateness over the paper, the eyes took longer to grasp a row of figures, the voice was somewhat cracked, the sentences wriggled from the lips haltingly and with greater effort. The young principal would often shake his impatient head behind the old man's back. He could, however, regard him only as a privileged being, a figure out of his own early childhood. When all was said and done, Schröder remained the friend who had given him apples in his boyhood, and had taught him how to write his figures. That eleven of his was still a vivid remembrance with its two elaborate tails at the lower end.

In this wise years went by, during which the book-keeper served as clock for several generations of school-children.

One cold wintry morning in March he walked as usual along the Reichenstrasse, took out his counting-house key, and was about to unlock the door when he noticed that it had already been opened. He turned ashy pale. What could this mean? He looked at his watch—a quarter to nine to the minute. He entered hurriedly, contrary to his wont. A murmur of voices greeted

his ear. The whole staff was assembled, not seated at the desks, but sitting or standing about in groups. And now they crowded round him, so that he became quite confused, grasped his umbrella still more tightly under his arm, and made for his desk in a state of perturbation. Then a hand was laid upon him, and his own was warmly pressed, and when he looked up there stood the young principal, who dragged him forward to a bed of roses and violets, which on closer inspection turned out to be that desk of his—his old wooden, ink-splashed desk ; only it had been converted into a flower-bed. And after that he heard the words : “ Fifty years—fifty years in our house—faithful co-operation—pension with full salary—and now come, here is some one else who wants to thank you.”

The old man's knees trembled ; but the impetuous junior drew him into the private office where he left him. A slender lady rose from her seat by the window. She was clad in a stiff grey silk dress ; snowy locks framed in her delicate features. In her hand she held a tall, graceful silver beaker which she now lifted daintily to her lips, saying, “ Fifty

years of faithful service ! To your health, my good Schröder ! To your health ! ”

The trouble in the old man's face changed to a blissful smile. He bowed as though he would have kissed her feet, took hold of the beautiful beaker, and drained it at a single draught. A bright glow was on his cheeks. Then, suddenly extending his arms, he made a few passes in the air, and with a gentle sigh sank down upon the carpet. The surprise had been more than the old clock-work could get over, and its motion ceased. The flowers of his jubilee served to deck his grave. “I go in gladness,” were the words inscribed by the old lady on his tombstone.



A CHRISTMAS STORY.



A CHRISTMAS STORY.

“ We fell out, my wife and I.”

DR. BECKBISSINGER had been separated from his wife. Every one knew about it.

The wrong was on his side ; such, the men's verdict. She was entirely to blame ; so spoke the women. We may therefore take it that no one knew much either way regarding the true merits of the case. The fact of the separation, however, lay beyond dispute.

He had remained in Hamburg on account of his practice. On account of her art—she was a sculptress—she had returned to South Germany, their common home.

The affair had aged Dr. Beckbissinger by at least ten years. That, too, was well established.

People thought it came of his having never unbosomed himself to any one, and by palpable manœuvres they tried to induce a re-

opening of the wound. That it must thereby find relief and heal they made no doubt. But the patient stubbornly resisted this mode of treatment, and little by little their prying concern for his heart's cure died out.

The interesting melancholy of his face furnished a fruitful topic of conversation ; his slightly grizzled beard was held to contrast delightfully with the black eyebrows ; and never surely did man boast so skilful or so finely-shaped a hand. There would have been depths of satisfaction in discovering whether he was likely to think of a second marriage. But, alas ! this proved impracticable ; and as the doctor ignored the questioning glances that were directed at him, and as languishing eyes failed wholly of their purpose, he gradually sank to the level which formed, it would seem, his sole ambition, and grew to be regarded as an excellent doctor and nothing more — deservedly so regarded.

This estimate of him, and his own individual leaning, brought about that he became almost exclusively a children's doctor, achieving notable success in that fruitful field of labour. He was "Uncle" to more than a hundred children, and with the

little nephews and nieces of his affinity showed himself just as talkative and merry as with their elders he was taciturn and unresponsive. Gratitude he thus earned in goodly measure, but he won few friends, unless his big tawny comrade, the St. Bernard dog Leo, be excepted. A strange atmosphere of isolation hung about the man and his dog ; unobservant people even hardly failed to be conscious of it.

“He has such an anxious mind,” said Frau Stürken, his old house-keeper. “From the very first he was set on being a doctor. And all his trouble’s come to him along of his doctoring, for to be sure the womenfolk ran after him no end, and that was more ’an she could stand. It were nat’ral enough, to my thinking, her feeling as she did ; it’s but human nature for folks to want to stick to their own and not see it took away by others, and all the more when it’s a matter of a doctor as must be for ever on the move like any cab-horse. Neither am I for blaming them other folks, for he’s that sort of man—well, if I’d but knowed him in time——Ah, what am I talking about ! You needn’t be staring at me like that. Why, I’m seventy-six, and my

doctor there he'll be seven-and-forty. That wouldn't exactly fit ; we're a sight too far apart. See yonder, there he goes down Bush Street, him as has the big invernness and the big dog and the grey hat. Don't he look the gentleman ? ”

The object of her laudation stood talking to the postman, on whom Christmas burdens weighed heavily, and who, in addition to his bag, now carried an armful of seasonable sendings.

“ Ay, doctor, there's one for you to-day. Half a minute while I look. Right, ain't it ? ” And he placed a large envelope in the doctor's hand. “ Compliments of the season to you, sir.”

“ From Holland ! ” exclaimed the doctor, taken by surprise, and opening the letter as he walked along. His brow cleared at sight of a smiling face that greeted him from within the folds of the letter. The envelope contained the portrait of a little boy of about three years old. With his tiny Christmas-tree upon his arm, he looked as roguish, as merry, as jolly as a plump little Santa Claus. And when in pleased astonishment the doctor had uncovered the small effigy, the best part was still to come. At the foot

of the mount in the funniest of scrawls stood the words, "A merry Christmas to the preserver of my life." It was meant to look as if the three-year-old baby fingers themselves had traced the characters. What a quaint idea !

Then uprose before the doctor's inward eye a vision of those dainty little fingers tightening themselves round his own in a deadly spasm, and once more he seemed to gaze into the agonised, despairing face of the young Dutch lady, the child's mother, as she besought him not to tear the rigid hands forcibly away, and not to desert her and her dying treasure that stormy night in lonely Heligoland. And there came back to him every incident of the night and the half day following, spent mainly in a crouched position at the bedside, until the child's fingers suddenly relaxed, and sleep brought healing. He remembered having to take his food in that attitude, to eat whatever the sick child's mother thrust into his mouth. He could not help smiling at the recollection of it. To neither of them had the comic aspect of the situation then occurred ; he had shared the grave anxiety of the moment ; it was as if he were watching his own child's

death-bed for the second time. In this picture—a presentment of perfect health—he was more than ever struck by a likeness between the two children, which during the boy's illness had impressed him so painfully. *A merry Christmas!* The wish was well intended, but he had done with seasons of rejoicing. *To the preserver of my life!* A sweet sound, and possibly no mere idle form of words. But ah! his own child he had not found means to save; his only child, and he had lost him. And then the tormenting reflection that everything might have turned out differently if the boy had lived! Thus even from this chance wayside blossom, meant to give only pleasure, he pressed out a bitter drop. Sighing he thrust the picture into his breast-pocket.

Two men of his acquaintance came by.

"The doctor begins to age," remarked the one; "seems in the dumps to-day. It's a pity, such a good chap as he is."

The speaker drew himself up erect, with a consciousness of his own exemption from other men's disabilities, and both lifted their hats airily.

"Here child, Angela," said one of them, "run across to Uncle, and ask him if he will join our Christmas party to-night." Then, turning to his companion, "We live under one roof, you know. Liberty don't seem to agree with him over well, 'pon my soul. Could scarcely believe it when the thing happened. An affair of jealousy, wasn't it? Should never have credited the old boy with that sort of feeling." And he stroked his smooth banking-house face complacently and winked with his small pig's-eyes at the doctor across the road. "Ah, he won't, won't he? Too busy? Well, we must console ourselves. Maybe he prefers to spend the evening with countryfolk of his own."

The doctor's tall, spare form threaded its way slowly through the throng of Christmas buyers in the goose-market, his grey hat seeming to float upon the human stream. Then he turned into the Damnthor Street, of which one end, stretching from the ramparts as far as the Botanical Gardens, had been converted into a veritable fir-tree plantation. The Christmas-tree dealers have a fixed place here. It was a sight to see. The biggest trees were built up on each side of

the pavement, and behind, extending as far as the town-moat, stood innumerable others of smaller growth. The yellow gravel-walk crackled with light frost; a scent of pine-woods filled the crisp air. Saleswomen with their hands thrust under their blue aprons tramped up and down to warm their feet. The space behind served as a workshop where men were now busy hacking and sawing and drilling holes. Trees do not always grow as shapely as they appear to the beholder on Christmas Eve. But the salesman's motto is, "Fraternity and Equality!" He lops a few branches off the body of an overgrown little trunk, and grafts them upon that of an ill-favoured comrade: "Share and share alike!" A great heap of twigs—these are in request for purposes of household decoration—lay strewn around the charcoal fire at which from time to time men and women would come to warm their frost-nipped, resin-stained hands. The doctor stood still and watched.

"Anything for you, sir?" asked a stout market-woman, pushing her way up to him. Business was naturally brisk this evening, small trees especially being in great demand. But a big, splendid one had just

then been disposed of. The buyer, a young and handsomely dressed girl, caught hold of it with her own hands; it overtopped her by a good length.

"The boy will carry it for you, miss," said the woman, pointing to him; "he'll be glad to earn a trifle."

"The boy? Well, he may carry my muff," cried the girl, and tossed it over like a ball; "but as for the tree, I must have that myself. Heavy? What matter? It's such fun to carry it."

And she shouldered it triumphantly and marched off, the boy at her heels, his hands stuck in the soft silk lining of the muff, and trying with a grin on his face to copy her tripping gait. Bystanders laughed; the doctor with them. Then a longing to buy something overcame him too. The aroma of childhood had been conjured up by those prickly shrubs; his soul became filled with an indefinable longing. His mind travelled back to the Swabian gingerbread and the tasty home-made cake that, as a lad, he had many a time been privileged to help knead into shape. Then he bethought him of the fir-tree, fetched from the far depths of the forest for his sweetheart — the ranger had let him fell it with his

own hands. Beneath that selfsame tree they had plighted their mutual troth. They were sitting under it, too, when suddenly a gay shower of golden nuts and apples and sugar dainties fell down about their heads. For he had chosen a pitch-pine instead of a fir-tree, and the heat of the room had caused its branches to droop. But they had somehow contrived to read only a glad meaning in this omen. And twice after that had they decked a tree for their boy, marking two happy years. Then the child had died, and his wife had left his house for ever, and henceforth no trees would bear their greenery for him. Yes, the people were right. His life was futile; even in his toil-filled hours he was still consumed by a burning unhealed wound.

He was moving on.

"If I may make so bold, sir, this is the one to choose. You'll find it the very thing you want," importuned the saleswoman, lifting a fine round plant by its tip from the ground. "My gracious! is that your dog? What's ailing him?" For the usually sedate Leo was comporting himself in truly unprecedented fashion. He snuffed the gravel searchingly, stood still, gave

a great leap, and went circling violently round one particular spot, to which his nose remained persistently directed. Then he rushed vehemently to his master, stood erect, laid a broad paw upon the doctor's waistcoat, his large brown eyes speaking eloquent entreaty.

"What are you after, old fellow?" asked the doctor, just as one might address a human being. An agitating desire to explain revealed itself in the animal's face, but nothing could come forth save violent barking.

Even the market-woman noticed the expression of his eyes. "It's plain there's summat on his mind."

The doctor glanced round on every side, but failed to discover the exciting cause.

"Poor old friend, I can't make you out," he said, gently removing the dog's paws from his body.

The woman grew impatient. "Will you have it? It's for you to say the word," she repeated, pointing to the tree.

"I know scarcely any one to give it to."

"Not any one?" urged the old crone, puckering her brow.

"By Jove, I do, though! Hand it over," he replied, as if struck by

a sudden inspiration. And he pulled out his purse.

"Look at him, Charlie," said the woman, as he walked quietly off with the little tree. "I should say he's a bit touched in the top story. He's got the look of a dreamer, and his old dog is sort of crazed too. He was ready to jump to the moon over that bit of a plant."

The woman was not altogether mistaken. In truth, Dr. Beckbissinger had the air of one walking in his sleep as he wended his way home, muttering to himself. A native custom had crossed his memory. It cheered and stirred him inwardly, and if he had but been in his own land—though, after all, what could that have availed? It was here that he had held and lost all that gives colour to the inner life.

The dog's strange antics continued. He was clearly following a scent, and now suddenly he stood still in front of the Waterloo Hotel, sniffed the air, and barked loudly, as if demanding something. Then, as his master did not turn round, he sprang roughly upon him, and tried to drag him back to the flight of steps. Involuntarily the doctor looked that way. High up on the straight staircase a woman's dark

gown was disappearing. "Leo, Leo," sighed the doctor, "has the sentimental fit seized both of us at once? It's just nothing, my good friend, nothing but this blessed Christmas that has made such fools of us. Get along, old fellow, we must be turning in again."

He strode on. His faithful Leo walked beside him, unwillingly, however, as if weighed down by a secret, the only one he had ever had to keep alone. Alas! that his good, generous-hearted friend had failed to ease him of it!

The dog's face was so puckered in meditation that the long yellow hair on the crown of his head actually stood upright. "Alas!" he seemed to say, "even between us two friendship has its limits, for he is, after all, only a human being! None of his kind has it in him to sound our depths. A man will find himself sleeping room by room with a brother lost to him years ago, or with one even dearer, and take no notice; while for us the mere footfall of a friend stands out among a thousand. Their nose is a simple mockery of a nose, good for nothing but catching cold. Yes, there he is sneezing again. Poor human beings! Poor imperfect

scentless creatures !” Such must have been the tenor of his thoughts, and when his master had gone into the house, Leo turned back wagging his tail, and, careless of dinner, trotted off to lay himself down meditatively in front of the stairs at the Waterloo Hotel, just for the chance that the dark skirt might come rustling by again.

Some hours elapsed ; crowds of people went to and fro, carriages rattled, tram-bells rang. “ A penny—only one penny for the dancing-man, made to move both arms and legs !” chanted the boy at the corner for the thousandth time. “ Christmas candles,” recited his opposite neighbour for the two-thousandth. From the goose-market a breeze would waft a passing odour of hot dough-nuts, and there came the cry, “ This is the Brunswick booth ! This way, ladies. Now, gentlemen, pray walk in ! ” In the court and on the stairs of the hotel, waiters hurried with trays of oysters. Leo knew their bustle of old, and now lay like a stone image, scarcely even blinking. At length a door opened, and a slender form glided down the stairs. A group of men, who stood chatting in the hall, suspended their remarks to get a sight of her.

Though no longer quite young, her face was singularly attractive, with something almost childlike in its gaze. She had a foreign aspect, and looked the product of another clime. She moved straight on. Behind her walked a girl carrying a richly-decked Christmas-tree.

Of a sudden a roaring sound arose, and an enormous yellow dog rushed towards her up the lower flight of stairs. The stranger started and appeared taken utterly aback ; but when the dog began to perform a series of extravagant gyrations, and, snuffing loudly, pressed himself against her clothes ; when he went so far as to take her hand caressingly into his well-furnished jaws, her nervousness became sheer terror. Deathly pale, she tried to free her dress from his clutch, and as his endearments still continued, she called out something to the girl, and fled precipitately back to her room. The dog remained outside the door scratching and barking.

Trembling in every limb, the lady sank down upon a chair, and covered her face with her hands. "It was Leo ! it was Leo !" she groaned. "O God ! If I had only not come to this place !"

Without all was confusion, as

though the wild huntsman himself were storming the corridors. A trampling and shouting were heard, and at intervals a loud bark and the cracking of a whip. She tore open her door, in front of which the girl with the Christmas-tree stood waiting.

"No fear, ma'am," said the latter ; "the old brute is gone. The porter drove him away with his whip."

Then her pallor changed to an angry flush. "His whip?" she cried, incensed. "Who allowed him to do such a thing? Do you know what dog——" She broke off and was silent awhile. "Order me a carriage, and let them know downstairs that I shall leave to-night," she said, shortly.

The girl laid the tree upon the carpet and went. Her mistress remained standing in the middle of the room ; big tears stood in her eyes, and rolled in two slow streams over her cheeks.

"Poor, good Leo ! A whip ! and why ? Because you were generous and faithful, and recognised me. You who alone are true ! Oh ! oh ! I should have done better to take you with me, instead of escaping from you, to take you back to

Munich, faithful heart that you are !” She threw open the window, and leaned out. “He has gone,” she said, “and it is best so. He is *his* dog, and anything of his is as indifferent to me as he himself or I to him !”

“The carriage is there, ma’am,” announced the girl ; “the same coachman as drove you yesterday.” She lifted up the tree again. “Will you take this inside with you, ma’am ?”

It had already grown dusk in the room, but was still almost light in the street. The stranger cast timid glances about her as she stepped to the carriage ; the big dog was, however, no longer to be seen. His unmerited and quite unwonted chastisement had wounded him to the quick, and he had gone to Frau Stürken in her kitchen to have his ears tucked into his collar, as was always done before he ate, and to meditate by the warm hearth upon human fickleness and treachery. That this woman, who had reared him, who had seemed so fond of him, and for whom he cared every bit as much as for his master, should, after a four years’ separation, have spurned him from her and seen him driven away with

blows ! From time to time he lifted up his noble head, and cast wistfully reproachful glances at the old housekeeper. But she had dropped off to sleep as she sat twirling her thumbs by the fireside, her big white cap nodding to and fro. Leo must have felt only more and more acutely the hopelessness of being understood in a world all at cross purposes.

Thoughts not very different harassed the young woman in the carriage this lovely evening. She was driving with her fir-tree on the back seat beside her. "To the Protestant cemetery," she had called out to the coachman, and he had answered, "Yes, ma'am. The same place, ma'am, as we went to yesterday with the big white doll?" The "doll" referred to was the marble statuette of a boy praying, which she had carved for her child's grave. The placing of this memorial in the cemetery formed the sole object of her short sojourn in Hamburg. A little tree must still be added, for auld lang syne, and then—away, away, with utmost dispatch. She already repented having come. The poor dog's glad bark of recognition was but the audible expression of a world of memories

that met her at every street corner to fix her with their mirthful or melancholy faces. In these, however, was no life ; they were but ghosts to flee from.

“ It is a sad world, and men are fickle. Let him who would keep heartwhole seek no communion with his kind.” Such the sum of her life’s teaching. Happiness she held to be a dream. For her there was nothing to cling to save those inanimate “ white dolls,” as the driver had called them, and fervently did she wish herself back with them once more. For the pursuit of art gave her strength and courage, while here in “ unchartered freedom ” she was ever haunted by voices that gently whispered of the past and him. “ And he ? ” thrilled through her ever and again : “ How did he bear it ? How does he yet bear it ? Is he now happy ? Nay, why that bitter laugh ? he was once dear to you ! ” “ I was a fool ! ” she exclaimed, vehemently, and forced herself to turn her thoughts outwards.

Yes, it had been a wonderful day. The noontide mist had fallen as hoar-frost upon tree and bush, upon grass and moss, covering them with a powdery white raiment, a fantastic growth of stars and twigs, foliage

and curling tendrils. Near at hand the eye took in these graceful details ; seen from afar they appeared, not singly, but fused into a network of the finest meshes that veiled the bare, dark boughs with their delicate white tracery, making the distance even more impenetrable than it becomes under the canopy of summer verdure. Low down between the branches glowed the sun, the fire-hued winter sun, sharply defined against a pale background. Rayless and cold it gleamed, no tiniest crystal yielding to its force. Nor did a breath of wind play over the snowy pageant. It was as if Nature had thenceforth renounced her care for green leaves and sun-steeped opulence of tree-tops, for sweet spring odours and the frenzied joy of living ; as if with solemn resignation she were making known her austere resolve.

Nowhere, however, did the frost lie closer than upon the roof of the lonely little building that stands at the entrance of the churchyard. Burying-grounds are often enough unbeautiful enclosures intersected in all directions by straight lines. But the Hamburg cemeteries are true homes of rest, with their almost park-like stretches, their

spreading trees, their deep stillness and solitude, their weeping-willows whose slender branches overhang the grey, half-sunken tombstones. Veritable thickets of roses some of the graves have become, the grass starred with wild flowers from early spring till late into the year. And indeed among Catholic communities the "God's acre" many a time serves for daily walks or meeting-ground of friends. Its silent tenantry are likely, however, to possess but scant attraction for those restless seekers after gain, the inhabitants of a great commercial city, who toil and moil in ceaseless fret and fever.

The stranger found herself in a solemn stillness. She dismissed the carriage, and taking her little tree, entered the gates. She loved this churchyard not only because a cherished being lay buried here; the poetry of the place had even in happier days appealed strongly to her imagination. Upon a slender bough a robin-redbreast was still chanting his winter lay, hopping fearlessly to and fro, and turning his pearly-white eyes from side to side. No other movement broke the quiet of the scene. An ever-deepening sense of peace arose

within her as she trod the solitary pathways, unwontedly solitary on this festive day, this day of closest union among the living. The air had a cool touch, reminding her somehow of her white marble statues. She no longer knew that she was walking ; all sense of suffering had vanished. She could fancy her misfortunes to have been a dream. And the ringing of the Christmas bells, and the hymn which a far-away barrel-organ was playing did but intensify her state of happy insensibility. It seemed to her as if were she dead and on her way to carry the tree to her lost child in heaven. Then among the dark thuja bushes she caught sight of the uplifted marble hands, and knew that she was on earth, and would never see the child again, and she began to shiver with acutest longing. One more corner to round and there——she staggered back panting——the side of a big tombstone afforded support or she must have fallen——at her child's very grave——how had he dared?——stood a man trying to make fast a little tree, the twin of hers, in the uneven ground under the praying hands. He ! He himself ! The one man from whom she would have sought to

flee to the remotest corner of the earth, and herself the instrument whereby he had been conjured up ! He did not see her, being still busy with the Christmas-tree, but any minute might reveal her to him, and the power of escape had left her. She uttered no cry, and stood motionless with close-pressed lips. She noticed his grizzled hair, his stooping shoulders, and the expression of hopeless sorrow in the once-cherished features. "And indeed you loved him tenderly !" again whispered the gentler voice within her. She would not listen to it before, but now the half-formed words "Because I was a fool," died on her lips.

"And you love him even yet," resumed the undaunted voice ; "and he loves you, else he would not have bethought him to come hither. He loves you in his dead child, and in like manner you love him !" Then she sighed deeply and closed her eyes—and in that moment she once more dreamed the dream of a reunion in heaven above the stars. Only that in that second vision both of them were carrying trees to the lost child.

"My Mary !" A sob awoke her. There he was, kneeling upon the

grass. His great, deep-set eyes brimmed over with tears, but as she cast her questioning gaze upon him all the grief they had caused each other melted from their faces ; un-forgotten love alone remained. And then, with a smile no words could tell of, she took a step to meet him. It was high time, for a significant howl now rent the outer darkness.

It was not winter, nor was it summer, but a quite unearthly season. Unearthly flowers were blossoming, unearthly fruits hung ripening. Even that slippery imp Chance had for the time cast in his lot with the powers that make for good, and sat in all innocence among the angels up in cloudland round the rising moon. But on the back seat of the carriage in which the reunited pair were driving home sat Leo, reconciled to life and gazing happily at both. The why and wherefore of things his understanding could not fathom, but he was fully alive to the certainty that they had found a happy settlement and that he formed part of the compact.

“ For when we came where lies the child
We lost in other years,
There above the little grave,
O there above the little grave,
We kiss'd again with tears.”

THE FIRST.



THE FIRST.

LATER on she became a celebrity and took the world by storm with her noble art and queenly figure, with the fire of her genius and the sunny radiance of her golden hair. But the golden hair and the queenly figure she could lay claim to long before she had served her apprenticeship to the stage. The flame within her flickered wildly, and she still stood far from the goal.

It was Steffi's first engagement. The light-hearted, unsophisticated Viennese maiden had taken sorrowful leave of her bright native city and her weeping grandmother, and had gone to Brunswick, a town hitherto unknown to her save through its sausages, but which had now been so obliging as to desire her services. Nowhere else had she been wanted.

In the dramatic school at Vienna she had figured—at that time deservedly—as a still unfledged, albeit highly-gifted, being. But then how many talents there are that never reach fruition, how many gifts that wither in the green! Her colleagues laughingly related how, as Mary Stuart, she had actually once left the stage in rags and tatters—so wild had been her play. Learn! Learn! Study! She must restrain herself, must compel Nature's turbulent forces within the chastened bounds of art. So urged her friends and critics.

And indeed she longed to learn. But one cannot practise swimming until one is actually in the water. And by hook or by crook she must continue to live, and that is more easily said than done when the wolf is at the door. The only thing for her to do is to seek a post, even though her power to fill it be not of the greatest, put her best foot foremost, and walk confidently; nay, even brag a little, so that the director and her colleagues may not suspect how unripe she yet feels herself to be.

And in this disposition it was that she came to Brunswick. But, alas! beneath its mountains lived just such men and women as are

elsewhere to be met with. To her dismay she found that these good people were able, in an incredibly short time, to take the measure of her artistic immaturity. The critics discussed her without mincing matters. The tragic actress, whose place she had hoped some day to occupy, stood to her guns as unflinchingly as her rather shaky person rendered possible, and held on like grim death to the parts of Juliet and Gretchen.

On one occasion, however, it did befall that freakish Chance, in the guise of lumbago, attacked the old stager, and caused the part of Gretchen to fall to our heroine's lot. Youth was now not wanting, nor beauty, nor an artless nature ; but it was still not Gretchen. Steffi's acting somehow failed to conjure up the aspiring, fervid burgher's daughter. A suggestion of Vienna lurked in her rendering ; it was "a trifle jerky" (as Steffi herself came to recognise later on) and not until the prison scene was reached did the true source of her power—her fiery energy—find vent.

But into this scene the old actress had been wont to infuse a character of far more accentuated pathos and tearfulness, and people were not

disposed to approve her double's unfamiliar, vehement conception of the part. The gallery alone applauded ; the critics wiped their spectacles in order to get a better view of the statuesquely beautiful maiden, but did not use their hands to clap.

Then Steffi, ready to die of exhaustion, feverish and trembling, returned to her lodging where her landlady, an old Hamburg woman and confirmed theatre-goer, read her a perfect homily while she prepared the tea and unfolded the slices of sausage, which to-day for the first time her lodger pushed dejectedly aside.

" You see now, you're downright ill," said the old crone, with a shake of her head ; " but it was only to be expected. You went to such lengths that I made sure something would happen to you—a fit, or worse. You mustn't wear yourself out in that fashion ; it would make life unbearable. There's no denying that Faust treated you abominably, but if you'd been a determined character, able to shriek and stand up for yourself, as you indeed did at the last, you'd have spoken to him earlier in the day, and said, ' Now listen, Henery,' and so on and so on,

'and you've knowed me as a respec'able girl; you'd best go in for treating me decently,' and so on. At least that's what I'd ha' done in your place. That's my way of looking at it. But them actors, I suppose they don't see things like us common folk. Only I says you shouldn't have gone rampaging about as you did at the end. It set my nerves in a quiver as I sat there listening. I felt all of a tremble, and was in a dozen minds to call down and ask if I shouldn't bring you a cooling mixture."

Steffi began by laughing at this tirade, but soon gave way to bitter tears. And in the night despair as to her art and her future overcame her.

This was shortly before the beginning of the holidays, and when the theatre closed for the summer there was no talk of her rejoining the company in the autumn. Her colleagues went their several ways; most of them, including the rival tragedian, migrated to a Hamburg summer theatre. Steffi remained out in the cold. There was, then, nothing for it but to move heaven and earth to get her bills paid, and that being done, to pack up her wardrobe and go home.

Oh that wardrobe ! She felt sick at heart as she lifted the things out of the cupboards and folded them up. She had scarcely worn any of them. And the old grandmother in Vienna, her sole surviving relative, had made their purchase possible only by the sacrifice of all the little savings from her tape and needle business. She looked to her grandchild as to a rich, carefully tilled cornfield, and was satisfied to go on patiently weighing out hanks of wool until Steffi should return to her, famous and rich, to reward her for the years of brooding solitude. It was well that the poor old woman could not behold her cherished one this night. Steffi was packing her trunks and baskets to the accompaniment of tears. The landlady had gone to bed after helping her till midnight, discoursing volubly the while and uttering exhortations which the girl by turns affected to make merry over or laughed to scorn. Now, however, she remained alone, and the defiant spirit died within her.

Three lamps that stood about made the low-ceilinged room as light as day and very hot in spite of the open window. Steffi ran hither and thither, often forgetting

what she was in search of, or remained standing in the middle of the room, sobbing spasmodically ; then, drying her eyes, she stooped again over the open baskets.

Sometimes she would step despairingly to one of the windows to drink in the cool night air, which, heavy with the scent of syringas, streamed upon her from the open space outside. It was a still and lovely moonlit night in June. Moonbeams played over mysterious corners and apertures and the windows of the old Dankwarderode Castle flashed like azure mirrors.

But to-morrow at seven the train will start. Everything must be ready by an early hour. Therefore to work, to work !

She took out the dress in which she had acted Gretchen ; a sudden wrath darted from her eyes, and she tossed it angrily on to the floor. But bethinking herself that her grandmother had paid away forty florins for this selfsame garment, she picked it up again with a sigh, smoothed out its soft blue folds, and laid it carefully in the trunk. While thus busied she became so void of hope, so utterly downcast, that she dropped into a chair, leaned her head upon the window-seat and

wept aloud. The low, melting note of a nightingale in some neighbouring garden fell gently on her ear. Its effect was to render her even more hysterical and unfit to rouse herself.

“Yes, it is all very well for you to sing,” she soliloquised, “but I—how am I now to return home? I wish I had never been born—I wish I were dead!”

Presently some one came stepping along below, with a light but firm-set military stride. She raised her head mechanically. The walker passed close in front of the house, then appeared to turn. It must be the watchman, she thought, and again pillowed her head upon her arms. But there—a second time the steps came by, and a third time, more slowly, hesitatingly; the subdued clank of a sword, too, could be heard. Then all was still. Curiosity revived; she put out her head and beheld the slightly-built, motionless figure of a man gazing upwards at her window. She could not distinguish the face, for it was lighter in her room than in the moonlit outer world. But he seemed suddenly to perceive her, for he gave a low cough, and then a voice, youthfully clear, timid, yet rapturous,

called up, "Farewell, dear lady, I have loved you very truly!"

After which, as if terror-struck at his own audacity, the speaker rushed away. The clank of his sword upon the pavement could be distinctly heard long after he had disappeared.

High overhead the distant nightingale broke forth in rapturous song.

Steffi rubbed her tear-stained eyes, and sprang to her feet. She felt the sort of delicious shudder a child experiences who, after having been told "There will be nothing for you at Christmas," suddenly beholds the unlooked-for tree standing there in a blaze of splendour. Then she drew a deep, deep breath. "So notwithstanding all, notwithstanding my faulty accent, my wild, undisciplined acting, my old rival who understands the thing so much, much better! Who might he have been? But what matters who he was? He was one person—one at least. Anyhow, I can now tell my grandmother, 'The Brunswick people did not think much of me, but oh! Grannie, there was one who loved me well.'"

She laughed out cheerily. "How Grannie will rejoice! Already

one ! And a young one ! ” And then, a half-realised, unformulated, “ Youth understands youth. He, too, has known the fever in the blood, and cannot always keep step with hoary age. He may even kick over the traces once in a way. That will pass. We shall both grow wiser before we’ve done. Keep up heart, Steffi, keep up heart ! ”

How easily the work now rattled on ! She actually found time to lie down for an hour before setting out to the station. Her task reeled itself off at lightning speed to the beat of those soothing, uplifting words that still played about her even in her dreams.

In *her* dreams, and in those, too, of the boy officer who had called up to her and had then thrown himself down on his bed flushed and overpowered with love and joy and moonlight and the song of nightingales. Near him lay the wreath of roses which he meant still to fling into her railway carriage next morning.

When he awoke it was, however, too late. Steffi had long been under weigh, had quitted the old town with a moist-eyed look of grateful tenderness. He flung the

roses into the river, but they cost him no pang. For he had spoken, and she understood. He felt quite happy ; yes, one must take heart and speak. And that he had done. Two more people were now rejoicing in the light of heaven. O opulent, self-sufficing Youth, how freshly fair thou art !



THE SCORCHER.



THE SCORCHER.¹



FAMILIAR figure his. Every one knew the stork-like gait, the unbending top-boots, the long, angular body in its close-fitting woollen jacket, the forward droop of the head under a battered, shapeless sou'-wester that had once, but very long ago, been glossy; not least, the grey, cloying crust of mud, half dry, half wet, that pencilled each detail of his person. He went shuffling along like any purposeless pedestrian, but that careless semblance was belied by the iron hook with which, when occasion offered, he would poke among the

¹ *Der Flectenkicker*, the canal-searcher. Mr. Tom Mann has kindly discovered for me that on the Thames the name "river scorcher" is applied to those who busy themselves when the tide is down in probing the mud for old iron and other chance findings, and who earn an occasional fee by bringing dead bodies to the mortuary.—H. A. M.

greasy, uneven dirt-heaps ; belied, too, by the nature of the ground he now traversed in his walk. No one but him would at so late an hour have made this place his haunt. Even the little street boys hanging by their bodies over the dripping iron balustrade of the bridge, felt their interest in him and his coveted grappling-hook grow pale, and began to shudder in the cheerless dusk and fog. They rubbed their purpled hands and stamped their wooden clogs, then slunk off one by one, not, however, without casting looks of some misgiving at their mud-splashed nether garments.

The long-legged man strode on, his heavily-soled boots giving out a spirting, gurgling sound. Mud, when trodden upon, has its own peculiar note. Now and again he would make a bend to avoid some point of suspicious depth that lay hidden in black water. A rat darted at intervals across his path. Occasionally he stooped to pick something up ; what, could not be seen, all objects having assumed the colour of the soil. As often as not the thing picked up was again rejected ; at other times, being held worth keeping, it was thrust into

the bag that hung upon his shoulders. This dangling grey receptacle had the appearance of a fisherman's net, as maybe it was—a worn-out one. It hung slack above; below, it was stretched a little: one could not see what it contained.

The road grew ever wetter as he walked; it would now soon be high tide, when his day's work, his foul, offensive, evil-smelling search must end. He turned to mount one of the narrow flights of iron stairs that lead up to the pavement, and had already placed his foot upon the lowest step, when a shrill voice from above called down to him—

“I say!”

The man raised his head stolidly, and saw a little red-nosed, wizened child's face squeezed against the iron railings and staring down open-mouthed.

“I say!”

“Well, what are you after?” he snarled, and raised his hook at her with a threatening scowl.

The little face vanished for a moment, but as quickly reappeared upon the steps. Then in a quiet, perfectly collected voice came forth the words—

“Please would you mind reaching me up my beads.”

"Drat the child! What do I know of your beads?"

"In that there box."

And a rather dirty little red paw protruded itself from under a yellow pinafore, and a small thin finger pointed straight to the corner behind the man.

More from instinct and habit than from any desire to oblige, the scorcher turned to the spot indicated, and actually managed, after some searching, to rout out a flimsy, oval-shaped object that lay jammed between a paling and the wall. From above it could hardly have been visible.

"You've rare good eyes," he said, in astonishment; then added, "Be your beads in that there?"

"They's inside. I wanted our little Billy to have 'em, but now he's had 'em long enough, and I'd like 'em back again."

The man had drawn forth the box by means of his hook. He had to proceed with caution, for it hung loosely together. The wonder was that it had held so long, being lightly built out of thin slips of wood. It must have been rigged up on the spot in this quiet corner, and certainly did not look much of a jewel-casket. It was in fact a very large

toy-box, heavier to lift than mere immersion in water could have rendered it. When he sought to remove the cover, the upper layer of wood tumbled off of itself, and—the man fell back with an oath—there lay the body of a child, clothed, and only a little decomposed by damp. Hastily he set down the box again, and replaced the lid upon it, his shoulders twitching as though with cold. Then from above came another shrill little call—

“Ain’t they in it?”

“No.”

“What *is* there then?”

“Mind your own business.”

And he climbed up the heavy iron steps, on which the clink of his hook could be heard. In a moment the child was beside him, a pitiful little object of some six years or thereabouts, with a round potato face, and a frock that was too big for her.

“But I tell you I put ’em in myself.”

“Not in that there box?”

“I did, though.”

“Run you home, child, you’ll be getting cold,” said the scorcher.

The little creature set her lips together and shook her head obstinately, as she remained trotting at the man’s side.

"Certain my beads ain't inside?"

"Seeing as I tells you they ain't."

"And little Billy, is he gone too?" she whimpered.

Then the long, grey man stood still, and scanned the child from top to toe. Her troubled, perplexed little face was shining with moisture; in her mouth she had hold of her plait of hair, a thin, straw-coloured little rat's tail, at which she gnawed excitedly.

"Child," he said, with grave emphasis, "do you mean to tell me as you've really set eyes on that there box afore now?"

"Why, to be sure I has."

"Where did you see it, then?"

"On our window-seat. Father used to keep his hammer and his gimlet and screws and nails in it, and then he took 'em all out, and put my little Billy in."

"Your father did that, did he?" The scorcher looked sideways at her. "Not your mother?"

"Nay, not mother. She's ill in bed."

"And you see'd it your own self, my little wench?"

"Yes, but you're not to tell," said the child, uneasily. She made a movement as though wanting shyly to pluck the man by the coat,

but straightway retreated, stuffing her small fist back again under the yellow pinafore.

"Hang me if I know what's to be done in this 'ere business! What's your father's name?"

"Johann Jacob Janzen; and you know in the middle of the night I just wakes up, for there was a light struck in our room, and I sees father with all his things on standin' at the window puttin' summat in the box, but as quiet as quiet!"

She paused in her animated narrative to recapture her plait, which had slipped from between her teeth. When she had caught it, after much head-shaking and thrusting out of her tongue, she resumed, chewing as she spoke—

"And I was wantin' to see too, and I calls gently, 'What are you doin', father?' But he didn't hear, and of course I couldn't speak loud lest mother should wake in the next room. So I just sits on my bed, and after a bit he goes gently out, and up I jumps off my bed and runs to look into the box, and there was my little Billy, as we'd had no more 'an five days, lyin' inside of it. He looked bad with his eyes all shut up. And then father comes back, and I jumps into bed and

says nothin'. And father had our old iron in one of his hands, and our paper flowers in the other—them as Aunt Anna once gived him—and he unties 'em all and puts 'em on Billy's little head, and he puts the old iron in too. And then he looks at him almost cryin' like and shakes his head, and goes out again. And then as quick as quick could be I pulls off my blue beads (I always kept 'em on in bed) and I stuck 'em in on one side under the bits o' paper, and says I, 'That's for you, Billy;' and I feels him, and he's as cold as ice in his little night-shirt. And then father took a big rope, and made the lid fast with it, and twisted the rope round, and then he opened the window, and says he, 'In God's name!' and he throw the box down into the canal, so as it splashes. And my beads is inside."

"Have you told this story to other folks, my little girl?" asked the scorcher, with an unpleasantly suspicious look.

"Nay," she answered, almost inaudibly.

"Is your father in?"

"But you mustn't be for lettin' out as I's told you. Yes, father's mostly at home these days."

"Out o' work?"

"Nay, he can't get out. His foot's all swelled up as big as that." With both arms she described a circumference about equal to that of her own body.

"How did it happen?"

"A case fell on him."

"A packer, is he?"

"Yes."

"Live near?"

"Close, just on the canal."

"I'm comin' along of you."

Then the child's tongue ceased to wag; the underlip fell visibly. But her companion paid no heed. Presently they reached one of those narrow alleys whose entrances are so scanty that a full-sized man must go in sideways for lack of elbow-room, and, if of average height, with head bent down. The scorcher was as used as the child to all manner of body contortions, and came through easily. The narrow, cellar-like passage led to a somewhat wider space occupied by a number of tall, cramped tenements in a bad state of decay, that leaned either forwards or to the side. At the other end there was of course free passage. Lights already flickered here and there in gloomy windows. The greasy, uneven ground was bestrewn with cabbage-

stalks, chips, potato peel, and apple parings. From an uncovered pipe in one corner of the yard came a monotonous drip of water. It was not much better here than at the bottom of the canal ; little to choose between them in point of fragrance. A dark, steep staircase with worn-out, dangerous steps and just a rope to hold by, led to Janzen's abode.

The child had run nimbly on in front ; the man followed like a long, dark shadow, of which, now that he had left off speaking, the little one felt afraid. They went round unexpected corners, past projecting walls that were damp to the touch, up two, three, neck-breaking flights of stairs. Then at length the child stood still. Through an ill-fastening door a narrow streak of light fell upon the topmost step, which, being only about half the size of the others, formed a sort of threshold. Any one standing upon it and shutting the door from outside was in danger of toppling headlong down the stairs. But to this man and this child such curiosities of architecture were an everyday experience and presented no obstacle. A person as short as the little girl had to stand upon the threshold step, press the latch and

then spring backwards ; a tall man like the scorcher was able to reach the door from a lower step. Stretching over the child's head, he now seized the knob. Without sound of bell or other noise, a dusky space, made visible by the light of a kitchen lamp, revealed itself to him, and his shadowy form glided in.

"Evenin'," he said.

"Evenin'," answered a surprised, not over-energetic voice, and a man in shirt-sleeves and braces, who sat in front of a small iron cooking-stove—the room was a sort of kitchen—turned upon the new-comer his broad, round, but pallid face. The child slipped forth from behind the stranger and came up to her father. She fastened herself upon his shoulder with a half-saucy, half-timid gesture, and rapidly whispered something into his ear.

"Sit you down," said the man at the stove. "Push them things off the chest ; I can't well rise."

And he glanced as he spoke at his right foot, all swathed up and looking like a shapeless bundle of rags.

"A bad business that," said the scorcher, shaking his head.

"Ay," was the monosyllabic answer.

Then he looked up, and the two

men took stock of each other for a moment. He of the ailing foot, with a shade of uneasiness in his strong, though now wasted face ; the stranger with a disconcerting air of quiet assurance in the piercing gleam of his hawk's eyes.

Janzen scratched his thick tawny whiskers. "The little 'un ain't been doin' no mischief, I hope?"

"Nay, it's with yourself my business lies."

"With me?" A dark-red flush slowly overspread the man's brow ; then he turned deadly pale, and his good-humoured round eyes began to travel restlessly between the stranger and a door at the side of his wooden chair. "Me?"

"You're makin' coffee, I see," said the uncanny guest, with a startling cordiality ; "don't let me be a-hinderin' of you."

"Only heatin' a drop against supper-time," stammered the other in a tone of confused apology, and with his roughened fingers he lifted a ring from the fire-hole. A few sparks sprang up in whose red light his face appeared all suffused with blood. Then he set a brown spoutless can upon the flame, his quivering hands causing everything he touched to shake and jingle.

"You'll not be for takin' it amiss, my comin' here?" remarked the visitor, keeping close watch.

"You're welcome," stammered the affrighted man; "only I don't quite make out——"

"I'm the canal scorcher, you know."

"Oh, ay."

A fragment of coal exploded; Janzen started violently, and his eyes again turned to the door; then followed a torturing interval of suspense.

"I'll take a drop of coffee with you, if you've got it to spare; it's a beastly damp night," remarked the stranger at last.

"At your service. Phœbe, reach over yon mug!"

"The yellow 'un, father?"

Great beads of perspiration stood on Janzen's brow; he wiped them furtively with his sleeve. The scorcher kept up a soft whistle between his teeth, and beat upon his dirty bag as if to while the time away.

"Found aught worth saving?" ejaculated the other, irresistibly driven to ask.

A low, hoarse laugh was the reply. Then, "Things as is worth havin' don't often come my way, only such as other folks wouldn't

thank you for: stockings without heels, and hooks, castaway bottles, and dead rats; nothing but rubbish." Suddenly he bent his long body to one side, and whispered in a sort of subdued falsetto, "I've found one thing as you know summat of."

The man half started up, then his broad-shouldered, sturdy figure shrank together with a helpless sigh. "I've nought to throw away," he muttered.

"In the canal," pursued the other, fixing him with his glittering eye; its pitiless keenness seemed to pierce him like a knife. And pointing with one finger towards the little girl, who had bent down as though under a blow, "You'd best keep an eye on that there child."

Janzen stared at her, then at the stranger, then again at the door that led to the other room, his chest heaving violently the while. Presently, however, he folded his broad hands upon his knees with a gesture of resignation, and looked the scorcher full and straight in the eyes. "I thought that was what you was a-drivin' at. But if aught comes of it, it'll be all one to me. See here," he lifted up his torn blue shirt-sleeve; "take a look round. Where there ain't nothing,

the king himself 'ud need to forego his due. Ah, it was different when I was a packer yonder at Gottschalk and Son's. I mind me of a accident as happened to me there. I let slip a chisel, and cut half through an artery"—he showed a deep dark scar on the left wrist—"but I was let to lie in bed, and our young gen'leman hisself comed to see me and pay my week's wages to the wife—wages as I'd not even earned. The good man should ha' lived longer, it would ha' been well for many another 'an me. I'm railway packer now, and what do they care if I and my wife and child starve and are done for? The railway can't visit me, the railway has nought to give me more than I've earned, the railway don't know what poor folks is a-needin' of. My old master he did know; his own father had worn wooden clogs time he settled hisself in this 'ere town. There's only one thing I's set my mind on"—he laid an urgent hand upon the visitor and looked at him in supplication—"my wife mustn't be worried about it, poor body! I'll take my trial if it's got to be, but she's had no hand in the job, and it might be the death of her. You've come here, and I suppose you're goin' to

have me took up by the police. If it's your duty, it's a bad look-out for me, for I've broke the law. I just hoped to pull through that way. I didn't for the life of me know where to turn. I've got no money and no friends. These three weeks past I've not set foot out o' doors; it just fetched the tears to see that there child, and my wife——"

A loud explosion from the stove interrupted him. The earthenware pot in which the coffee was preparing had burst, and a brown stream ran hissing over the heated hearth. "Oh!" exclaimed all the three in tones of lamentation, stepping back. Phœbe added, with a touch of housewifely concern, "Father, you *are* careless!"

Suddenly they paused to listen; from the adjoining room came a low call: "Johann!"

"Good Lord! if it ain't gone and waked up my poor Tilly. Stop! I'll be back in a minute."

He shuffled into the next room as fast as his lame foot would let him; the door remained ajar. Little Phœbe ran after her father. Quite distinctly the visitor overheard the following conversation:—

"Anything broke?"

"Ay, our old coffee-pot."

"Eh, what a pity!"

"But you've actually managed to sit upright, my old lass, and you look quite lively this evening."

"Ay, and I do believe I've turned the corner."

"Oh, Tilly, that 'ud be a good job."

"It would that, Johann. How's your foot?"

"Better—a sight better."

"And the—the little 'un's buried by this?"

"Ay, Tilly."

There was a sound as of sobbing.

"You'd have been glad to keep him?"

"Surely, Tilly."

"It were a pity we lost him, Johann."

"It were, Tilly."

"I'm right glad as he died in my arms."

"Yes, my poor Tilly."

Then after a pause: "To-morrow I'll get up and we'll have a proper dish o' broth—there's no taste in your brew."

"Well, you know, Tilly——"

"Of course I know as men folk ain't up to much; you can't look to do better 'an the rest. But once you're fit to get to work again——"

The man heaved a sigh : " God grant it be soon."

And then came Phœbe's piping voice—" Mother, I got four for writin' to-day at school. First she was only for givin' me two, but I cried a lot, and then she got in a temper and then seemed worried like, and let me have four."

When Janzen bethought him to return to his visitor he found the kitchen empty. There was a damp place beside the box on which the scorcher had squatted ; he had gone without their having even heard the door bang.

The man's fears were not lessened by this circumstance.

They might have increased if at this precise moment—it was now high tide—he could have beheld his dreaded tormentor take his stand upon a coal-barge, could have watched him pushing and working towards a definite point of the canal, fishing with a dredging-net, reaching far over the boat's edge to peer into the dark water, from which at length, after many futile attempts, the net, no longer empty, was drawn up.

A few hours later, when night had fallen, the same ominous figure might have been seen far out upon the Elbe in a yawl that was not his

own property and did not carry the regulation light. This time, however, he appeared not to be seeking anything. He rowed swiftly, noiselessly, in the middle of the stream; then from the bottom of the yawl he hauled something up—a heavy object, heavy even it would seem to the man's great strength, and that rattled as if full of stones. Slowly it was dragged to the edge, its weight making the boat tilt downwards on one side; and then, with a loud plash, the thing fell overboard and straightway sank. The man circled a few times round the spot; next he took out a lantern which he lit and suspended in the yawl. Then, in leisurely fashion, he rowed back up stream. It was a very peaceful and contented face upon which the faint light fell each time that he bent forward to dip his oars in the water.

Two days later a man wearing a boatman's linen jacket knocked at Janzen's kitchen door. Janzen recognised him only after close inspection, when he again turned deadly pale and pointed to the dwelling-room. The stranger stepped back a pace, and from the threshold said, half-whispering, "I just looked in so as you should know it's stowed

away all right. You'll not need to bother no more about it." Without appearing to notice Janzen's outstretched hand he added, "And don't ye take it amiss, there's a few shillings here what the boatmen have put together. And how's your wife keepin'? And see, there's Phœbe's blue beads as she was a-wantin' of so badly."



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